

THE ULTIMATES: TOMORROW MEN

By Michael Jan Friedman

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Tomorrow, Tony Stark echoed inwardly.

He turned over beneath his bedcovers, unable to find a comfortable position. *See you tomorrow, Tony.*

The words were etched into his brain, as inescapable as one of those inane commercial jingles that always lingered with him for days, imposing on him its too-happy hype for a pine-scented air freshener. Or a frozen dinner. Or a new kind of bunion remover.

I shouldn't talk, Stark mused. *My companies*

make all those things. But then, there was precious little in the world his companies *didn't* make.

See you tomorrow, Tony...

He had heard that somewhere. *Recently*, he decided. *But where? And from whom?*

Then it came to him. He slid his hand along the silken surface of his sheet toward the other side of his bed. Unfortunately, there was no one there.

Annoyed, Stark swore beneath his breath. He could forgive himself for a lot of things, but being a bad host wasn't one of them.

Especially when his guest had been Terri Topasandra. Most men would have donated a kidney to get near the sexy, platinum-haired co-host of America's favorite morning talk show.

Her producer had arranged an interview with Stark, who was serving as corporate spokesman for Special Olympics, to talk about the upcoming games. The plan was for the two of them to meet for drinks so they could flesh out what they were

going to say.

One thing led to another, which led to Stark's midtown penthouse, which led to his five-thousand-square-foot bedroom with its ornately carved Italian-marble columns and its staggering, one-way-glass view of New York City, which led to -

Nothing, apparently. Or at least nothing Stark could remember. *Shame on me.*

Unavoidably awake, the billionaire decided that he might as well open his eyes. But when he did, he found the pouting, bespectacled, slightly paunchy figure of his butler standing beside the bed.

"Wakey-wakey," said Jarvis, a note of sarcasm in his voice that was no less cutting for its familiarity. Using the remote control in his hand, he turned up the lights.

"You hate me," Stark groaned, "don't you?"

"As nature hates a vacuum," said his butler.
"Which reminds me - I need to refill your Scotch decanter. Someone left it as empty as the void

between here and Mars."

"That would be me," Stark admitted.

"Do tell. I had a feeling it wasn't the young woman who accompanied you to Driscoll's on the Park last night. She didn't seem ample enough to drain a decanter all by herself."

Stark looked at him. "You wouldn't, by any chance, know what time Terri left?"

"I would say it was between two and two-fifteen," said Jarvis. "Fortunately, I was up watching reruns of *The Iron Chef*, so I was available to call her a cab."

Stark smiled ruefully. "Sorry about the inconvenience."

"If I may say so, sir, it is not me to whom you should be apologizing. The young lady looked rather disappointed when she left."

See you tomorrow, Tony ...

"Do me a favor," said Stark. "Send her a bouquet of flowers. A big one."

"Of course," said Jarvis, with a roll of his eyes.
"That will take care of everything."

Stark looked at him. "Meaning?"

"Meaning you have been drinking a great deal of late - even *for you*. To this point, your liver has made a heroic effort to keep you from poisoning yourself, but I doubt it will be inclined to do so indefinitely."

Stark closed his eyes again and managed a wistful smile. "No need to be worried about 'indefinitely,' Jarvis."

"Ah, yes," said the butler. "The tumor in your head. As if it were possible I had forgotten."

It was the tumor, untreatable and inoperable, that made Tony Stark work so hard - not only at business, but at life. And for him, drinking had become part of both endeavors. *A vicious circle if ever there was one.*

Funny, though - his head didn't hurt the way it used to when he got drunk. *A little compensation for the stranger in my skull?* he wondered, not for the first time. *Or have I finally killed too many*

nerve cells to know when I'm in pain?

"By the way," said Jarvis, "you have another full slate of appointments today. Breakfast with the governor..."

"Of which state?" Stark asked.

"*This* one," said Jarvis. "Followed by the interview with Miss Topasandra, assuming she is still disposed to speak with you after the way you treated her. After that, a videoconference with General Fury and your engineering staff, golf at Shinnecock with Mister Rodriguez, and..."

"Roll that back for me," said Stark.

"Golf?" asked Jarvis.

"No. The Fury thing."

"Apparently, he wishes to discuss the improvements you are implementing in your armor. As you will recall, he requested that he be kept abreast of such developments."

Stark sighed. *The armor*. Some days he couldn't wait to get into it. Other days he couldn't wait to

get out of it.

Today is one of the get-into days.

"Call Hogan," he said, "and tell him to get the new unit ready. I feel like taking her for a test drive."

Jarvis made a sound of disapproval. "Last time you did that, you missed breakfast entirely. Mister Gates was most perturbed, if his unfriendly takeover bid was any indication.

"Gates got over it," said Stark, pulling aside his bedclothes and swinging his legs out of bed. "And if it comes to that, the governor will too. Especially if he wants that Stark Dynamics plant to break ground in Schenectady next month."

"I'll phone the governor," said Jarvis, "and inform him that you'll be delayed. Also, that you recommend the eggs benedict for elected officials who have been stood up by rude, unthinking industrialists."

"Hey," said Stark, as he got up and padded across the tawny, lavishly grained wood of the floor to take a shower, "whose side are you on?"

"The side of Good, of course," said the butler.

The water in Stark's shower, which was as cold as he could make it, stung him into high alert. By the time he emerged from his spacious, white-tiled bathroom, toweled and dry, Jarvis had laid out a set of silk boxers, a lightweight tan suit, a contrasting dark blue shirt, and a pair of soft, imported loafers.

"By the way," said the butler, "it's been some time since you gave Happy Hogan a raise. You asked me to remind you about it. Also, it's been some time since you gave *me* a raise."

"I asked you to remind me about that as well?" Stark wondered as he dressed himself. "Or did you come up with that on your own?"

"On my own," Jarvis conceded readily enough. "Still, I would say it's worth the most careful consideration."

Stark chuckled. "You're lucky I don't turn you in for tax evasion, you old fraud. Or are you going to tell me you've been claiming those bonuses I give you every - "

Before he could finish his sentence, a brassy chime - like the banging of a distant gong - filled the room. All too aware of what it meant, the billionaire said, "Stark here," just loudly enough for his comm system to pick up.

"Mister Stark," said the Brooklyn-accented voice of Happy Hogan, "we've got trouble here in River City"

River City being Hogan's nickname for the Triskelion, the breathtaking, three-pronged facility built on a boomerang-shaped island in the upper bay of New York harbor. Stark had developed it to house his latest flier, a joint venture with the federal government.

The venture had already paid a whopping big dividend - if one could call the rescue of the human species from an extraterrestrial horde a *dividend*.

"Anyone else there?" asked Stark.

"For now," said Hogan, "just us chickens."

In other words, no "persons of mass destruction," as the government preferred to describe them.

Too bad, Stark thought. He had discovered the value of having superpowered colleagues to make up for his suit's inconsistencies.

And his own.

Still, he said, "I'm on my way, Hap. And don't forget the olives."

"I'll cancel the governor," said Jarvis, making his way to the phone.

"Thanks," said the billionaire, leaving his street clothes on the bed and heading for one of the room's smaller closets - an intimate one containing a single suit, and not at all the kind Jarvis had laid out for him.

At a word, the zebrawood closet door slid into a pocket in the wall beside it, revealing a golden set of molded, metal-alloy body armor with a few apple-red highlights. And yet, with its immense capacity to store and direct electromagnetic energy, it was so much more than mere body armor.

It was, effectively, Iron Man. Or at least an earlier version of Iron Man, rendered obsolete

months earlier by the development of more advanced models.

But in a pinch, it would do.

With Jarvis's help, Stark slid into the armor piece by piece: first the plastron, then the leg units, then the gauntlets, and last of all the headgear. It took him a moment to get used to breathing the suit's air supply, but no more than that.

After all, he was an accomplished scuba diver. Having to depend on a portable oxygen supply was nothing new to him.

Once Stark was certain everything was locked into place, he released the thick green lubricant that cushioned him from impacts and kept the suit's hard parts from rubbing against him. Then he moved to the set of transparent doors that led to his balcony, emerged from them into a windy blue Manhattan sky, and took a running jump.

As he cleared the balcony, he activated his propulsion system and shot through the air - all in one fluid motion. *But then*, he thought, *I've had a fair amount of practice at it.*

Dipping his left shoulder, he veered past the steel-and-glass skyscraper directly in front of him. Normally, he took a moment to wave to the secretaries inside it. *Perhaps more than a moment*, he allowed.

But not this time. *I'll give them two shows tomorrow*, Stark promised himself silently.

Suddenly, he hit a headwind and bounced up and down. Reaching for his palm controls with his middle finger, he slowed himself a little. Then he angled off on an ascent vector, finding an altitude where the wind wasn't quite so strong and oppositional.

Of course, the latest version of his armor would have sliced through headwinds twice as strong. But that suit was hanging in the Triskelion, where he had left it.

Funny, Stark thought. *Six months ago, this armor was cutting edge. I felt as secure in it as I would in a Stark International corporate jet. Now I feel like a Ping-Pong ball in a wind tunnel.* .

Not that he was averse to a little risk now and then. *It's not like I'm going to live forever.*

Steve Rogers shook his head slowly from side to side, and said, "I don't think I can do this."

"Sure you can," said Janet Pym, the willowy brunette sitting across the round, imitation-marble table from him. "You're Captain America. You can do anything."

He looked up at her. "Not this."

"Oh, come on," she said sweetly. "For me?"

Rogers looked down at his plate again and scowled at the offending item. "I don't think so."

Jan covered his hand with hers. It was slender but strong, like the rest of her, and cool to the touch. "Look," she said, "we've been through this before. Have I ever led you astray? Even once?"

"No," he conceded.

Though the newspapers would say otherwise, Rogers couldn't help thinking. They had called Jan an adulteress for being with him. But that was a separate subject, even more distasteful to him

than the one at hand.

"When we went to Taste of Japan," Jan reminded him, "you thought you were going to barf. But by the end of the night, you were scarfing down sushi like there was no tomorrow."

"That was different," he said.

"Raw fish? What could be more daunting than rawfish?"

"I ate raw fish back in the service," he admitted. "It was part of survival training."

She looked surprised. "You never told me."

"It didn't seem like a good time to bring up the war."

In fact, it had been their first night out, when they weren't sure yet what they might mean to each other. Looking into the dark mysteries of her eyes, the war in Europe was the *last* thing he had wanted to think about.

Jan nodded. "Gotcha. But you're still not off the hook." With her free hand, she moved his plate a

little closer to him. "One bite. That's all I'm asking."

Rogers forced himself to consider what she had ordered for him. "But for the love of God," he whispered, so the other diners in the restaurant wouldn't hear him, "pineapple *on pizza*?"

She smiled. "There's a first time for everything."

And in the last couple of weeks, she had introduced him to any number of firsts. *The first time I took a picture of someone with a telephone. The first time I hit a ball with an aluminum bat. The first time I made love to a married woman.*

He was still getting used to that last one. But it wasn't as if he had *planned* to get involved with Jan. *Fate threw us together*, he thought, echoing a line from a black-and-white movie whose name he couldn't remember.

One thing Rogers *didn't* feel was sympathy for Jan's estranged husband. Hank Pym was a louse. Any man who brutalized a woman didn't deserve her. *Period.*

People called him old-fashioned all the time, but standards of civilized behavior weren't supposed to change with the decade - or even the century. To his mind they still applied, though he had been asleep in an ice floe for sixty years.

"You're stalling until it gets cold," Jan said, mistaking Rogers's reverie for a tactic. "But it's not going to work. There's plenty more pineapple pizza where that came from."

He sighed. "I'm sure there is."

She wasn't going to relent until he gave it a shot. So before he could gag at what he was putting in his mouth, he picked up the slice and took a bite.

"There," said Jan, looking ever so pleased with herself. "Not so bad, right?"

Rogers didn't answer. He was too busy crunching pineapple chunks in his mouth and trying not to think about the other ingredients that came with them.

Suddenly, he felt a buzzing against his thigh. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the small, cell phone-like device Tony Stark had given him.

"What do they want?" asked Jan, who was no doubt feeling the buzzing as well.

Since the two of them had become an item, they had received a summons from the Triskelion maybe half a dozen times. Initially, Jan had reached for her comm device the same way Rogers had, only to have him beat her to the draw.

But then, his reflexes were considerably faster than those of a normal human being. *Part of the super-soldier package*, he reflected.

Holding the device to his ear, he said, "Rogers."

"It's Hogan," came the response. "We need you at the Triskelion on the double. Jan too," he added without a hint of irony, "if you happen to know where she is."

"I do," said Rogers, smiling wryly to himself. He gave Hogan the address of the building they were in. "Send Gottschalk. He's better at this than Valentino."

"Will do," Hogan said, and terminated the link.

Jan hadn't waited for the end of the exchange to put her sunglasses away and close up her bag. When Rogers got up from the table, she was right beside him.

Fortunately, they had paid for their food already. That was a habit they had gotten into after the first time they were precipitously called away.

Emerging from the restaurant, they came around the building and entered the alley beside it. Then Jan handed Rogers her bag and disappeared out of her clothes - or seemed to. In actuality, she had shrunk to the size of an insect, in which form she would ascend through the upper reaches of the alley until she reached the roofline.

Rogers had his own way of getting up there. Slinging Jan's bag over his shoulder, he leaped onto one of the alley's walls. Then, using a crack in one of the bricks for purchase, he propelled himself to a higher spot on the wall opposite.

By repeating the process over and over again, he made it to the roof seven stories above him in less than thirty seconds. A flight of stairs would have made the job easier, but it hadn't been an option.

Besides, anything was better than eating pineapple on his pizza.

A moment after Rogers swung himself onto the roof, Jan showed up full-sized as well, in a special expandable-and-contractible bodysuit Stark had designed for her. And a moment after that, they heard the distant but unmistakable hiss of helicopter blades.

Rogers looked back over his shoulder, in the direction of the harbor and the Triskelion. A small, sleek black-and-gray copter was heading for their rooftop, looming larger as it came. And unless his eyesight was going, it was Gottschalk at the controls.

Rogers was grateful. He didn't mind risking his life if that was what the situation called for, but he didn't want to lose it because he had drawn the wrong pilot.

Making his way east between rows of upward-thrusting office buildings, airborne Tony Stark caught sight of the East River. It glistened restlessly in the morning sunlight, a slice of green wedged between Manhattan and Roosevelt Island.

Away from the skyscrapers, he thought, *I'll make better time*. And if the urgency in Hogan's voice had been any indication, time was very much of the essence.

Rocketing past edifice after edifice, the street below him little more than a blur, Stark finally broke free of the skyline. This time he veered right and tracked the river, his optical filters darkening to compensate for the direct sunlight, the wind howling at the speed of his passage.

Up ahead, the elegant antique span of the Brooklyn Bridge stood guard over the lower reaches of the river. In a matter of seconds, Stark was sailing between its towers, watching the Upper Bay of New York Harbor spread out before him like a dream of emeralds.

Lower Manhattan vanished on his right, to be replaced by the more distant shore of New Jersey. On his left, Brooklyn fell away to reveal the Verrazano Bridge and Staten Island.

The chunks of rock called Ellis and Liberty loomed in front of him, Lady Liberty raising her torch with quiet confidence from the confines of the latter. And just beyond those historic pieces of public

property, taking up every inch of a man-made island, lay the imposing, ultramodern structure known as the Triskelion.

Built by Stark Industries, thought the billionaire, at a cost to the taxpayer of virtually nothing. But then, it wasn't the first time he had treated Uncle Sam to a free lunch.

It was all part of the Stark legacy. When he was gone, he wanted people to say nice things about him. *That Tony Stark, what a guy. Too bad he had that time bomb in his head.*

And so on.

Aiming for the truncated cylinder in the Triskelion's center, he curled around it to approach the round asphalt disc of the helicopter pad. Cutting thrust at the last possible moment, he landed on both feet. Then, without breaking stride, he headed for the gray steel security door.

Happy Hogan was waiting for him alongside it. A strapping fellow with a head for details and the hands of a heavyweight boxer, Hogan was the supervisor of every important operation Stark Enterprises had ever undertaken. That made him

the man in charge of not only the Triskelion, but also the Iron Man project.

"Good to see you," said Hogan, the wind snatching half his words.

"What's going on?" Stark asked.

He had forgotten how awkward it was to walk in this version of his armor. *Like wearing ski boots*, he thought. *Strictly heel to toe, no give in the instep.*

"We've got intruders," said Hogan, using a palm-sized remote control device to open the door.

Stark eyed his colleague through the optical filters of his mask. "You're kidding, right?"

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"Wish I was," Hogan told him, and led the way inside.

Intruders? Stark repeated to himself as he followed Hogan into the bowels of the Triskelion.

The Chitauri had infiltrated the place months earlier, but they were extraterrestrials with the ability to take on human forms. It was disconcerting to think that with all the Triskelion's security measures, the place could be invaded a second time.

"Any idea who they are?" Stark asked, as they negotiated the corridor that led to the facility's operations center. "Or what they're here for?"

Hogan shook his head. "None. Worse, we don't know how they got in. One minute, everything's fine. The next, my security screen is lighting up like a Christmas tree."

At the end of the corridor, an interior door slid j aside for them. It revealed the Triskelion's expansive, high-ceilinged operations center, a blue-gray amphi-theater with six ascending ranks of sleek black computer stations.

The place was crawling with SHIELD personnel in army-green uniforms, not to mention Stark's civilian-garbed security people. As he walked in,

they all stopped what they were doing and looked up - and then returned to their respective tasks.

"I'd like to see these intruders," said the man in the high-tech armor, heading for the center's security monitor.

"Be my guest," said Hogan.

Stark stopped in front of the oversized monitor, which was vaguely concave, and peered at its screen. It showed him a well-illuminated section of gray corridor, though he couldn't have said on which level it was located.

The intruders, all five of them, were moving along the passage without the slightest appearance of caution. They were all tall and athletic-looking, wearing white jumpsuits with narrow green modules of indeterminate purpose deployed along the sleeves, thighs, and left side of the midsection. And they were all bald, including the lone female in the group.

"Watch this," said Hogan, punching a quick command into the keyboard beneath the monitor. "It's what happened to the first security detail I sent to meet them."

It was made up of six highly trained SHIELD personnel, all of whom Stark knew by name. In accordance with Triskelion security protocols, they had their weapons in hand when they confronted the intruders and asked them to surrender themselves.

The officers' advice fell on deaf ears. The intruders didn't even so much as break stride.

At that point, the security team had no choice but to use force. Leveling their weapons, they hammered the intruders with a barrage of hard-rubber projectiles.

But the bullets never seemed to reach their targets. Instead, they were deflected by what appeared to be invisible barriers.

"Impressive," said Stark. "Personal shields. And no flare at the point of impact."

"Also," Hogan reported soberly, "some impressive directed-energy ordnance."

As if on cue, the intruders unleashed a series of pale violet beams. Whenever one of them struck a security officer, it sent him or her flying

backward.

In a matter of seconds, the security detail was sprawled on the floor, unconscious, and the intruders were stepping over them on their way along the corridor. Stark's jaw clenched.

"That kind of tech takes serious power," he said. He tapped his metal-alloy forefinger on the screen. "So where the hell is it coming from? *You* see any batteries on them?"

"I don't," said Hogan.

The billionaire's latest Iron Man armor used batteries no bigger than a cell phone, but they were absolute state-of-the-art, a Stark International exclusive. The intruders couldn't be packing anything smaller...

Could they?

Hogan punched in another command and the scene on the monitor changed. "The second detail," he said with obvious reluctance, "didn't last even as long as the first."

As before, the intruders remained unscathed in

the face of the security team's barrage. Then they cut loose with an attack of their own, felling all obstacles in their path.

"Whoever these bastards are," said Hogan, "they're well equipped."

"That they are," said Stark. "Let's see how they fare against someone *better* equipped."

"We've gotten hold of Rogers and Jan. You want to wait for them?"

"They can join me when they get here."

"Roger that," said Hogan. He consulted the data scrawling across the bottom of the monitor in bright green characters. "They're in section eighteen now, trying to burn their way through the door. I'll insert you myself, if you like."

"I'd be honored," said the billionaire.

But he was already on the move, so he didn't know if Hogan had heard him. Making his way across the ops center, he went through a door perpendicular to the one he had come in and proceeded along the Triskelion's wide central

corridor.

Seeing the boss was in a hurry, the security people stationed in the passage moved to either side for him. Normally, the place would have been full of engineers moving from office to office, but not after an intruder alert.

The engineers have all been evacuated, Stark thought. And the administrative staff along with them.

"I'm assuming you want to ambush these guys from behind," said Hogan.

"You must be a mind reader," said Stark.

"If there's one thing I know about you, it's that you have no qualms about blindsiding the opposition."

Stark glanced at him, feigning injury to his feelings. "*Ladies' Home Companion* called me 'the picture of chivalry' in their Big Spring Cleaning issue."

Hogan grunted. "Ask Victronix Technologies about your chivalry. "You put them out of the computer

chip business so fast their heads are *still* spinning."

"I had to protect my stockholders," said Stark. "Besides, the Victronix people were coming after us. If I hadn't skewered *them*, they would have skewered *me*. And correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't I make sure all their employees had job interviews with my companies?"

"Sure," said Hogan, "split hairs."

A stranger would have deduced from their conversation that they weren't worried about the intruders in section eighteen. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Stark's banter with Hogan was his way of getting loose, like an athlete before a game - except he was stretching his mind instead of his muscles.

Less than three minutes after he left the ops center, Stark found himself standing in front of a metal ventilation grate. As he watched, Hogan pulled a miniature tool kit out of his pocket, removed a Phillips head screwdriver, and began working on one of the screws that held the grate in place.

Stark took a deep breath and let it out slowly. *Five of them*, he reminded himself. *So you've got to keep moving. And stay close to them, so they get in each other's way.*

At heart, he had always been more of a talker than a fighter. Even in grade school, he had been able to worm his way out of confrontations with a handful of well-chosen remarks.

But the intruders weren't interested in talking, if their encounters with his security people were any indication. *So we go to Plan B*, he thought, checking the readout on the inside of his wrist to make sure he was getting his full download.

Which he *was*.

Stark's armor had its own energy supply for routine applications. But special situations called for amplifications of its power, and these were relayed to him from hidden sources through one of several Stark International satellites.

Hogan finished removing the last of the screws holding the grate in place. Then he pulled it away from the wall, exposing an aluminum passage that connected with other aluminum passages in

a network that ran the length and breadth of the Triskelion.

These would, with the assistance of Stark's tracking system, lead him to the intruders.

"You ready?" asked Hogan.

"Never more so," said the billionaire. Then he activated his propulsion system and plunged into the passage.

Go to one meeting at the Pentagon, thought Nick Fury, and everything turns to crap.

"Do we know anything about them?" he asked.

"Not yet, General," Hogan said over the secure communications connection. It was hard for Fury to hear him over the roar of the helicopter carrying him back north. "But we hope to by the time Mister Stark comes out of there."

Fury suppressed a curse. Stark was a wunderkind when it came to technology, but he wasn't the guy they wanted fighting in close quarters - or for that matter, fighting at all.

That armor of his had worked fine in the aerial battle against the Chitauri, where Stark had room to maneuver. But within the confines of the Triskelion, it was as likely to do harm as good.

Which brought to mind the guy Fury would have preferred under those circumstances. "Any word from Rogers?"

"He's on his way," said Hogan. "Mrs. Pym, too."

Personally, Fury thought it was fine that those two were playing house, considering what they had been through lately. They both needed someone to lean on, so why not each other?

But there was the team to think about. The Ultimates were still a publicly financed operation, at least in part, and folks in the Bible Belt weren't going to take kindly to their heroes breaking one of the Ten Commandments.

Make that two, Fury thought, correcting himself, if you include Thou shalt not kill.

But it wasn't Rogers or Jan who had broken that commandment. It was the guy in the transparent holding unit deep in the heart of the Triskelion -

the guy who would stay there no matter what threats might manifest themselves.

Suddenly, a chill climbed Fury's spine. *What if the intruders are after Banner?*

They would have to have known about him first, and that assumed a lot. But they had penetrated the Triskelion without leaving any evidence of their entry, which Fury would have called impossible until a little while ago. To pull off that kind of stunt, they must have had access to top-secret information. It wasn't that much of a stretch to imagine that they had data on Banner as well.

In his savagely altered state, Banner had been a big gun for the Ultimates in their battle against the alien Chitauri. Hell, he had saved the whole damned day. Fury hated the idea of someone else having so destructive a weapon.

Before he would allow that, he would see Banner put down.

He didn't like the idea of killing someone who trusted him - someone who hadn't knowingly done anything wrong. *But it's a cruel world.*

Sometimes people had to do things they weren't proud of. Hell, he had *already* done some of those things, hadn't he? So what was one more?

Of course, he reflected, I might be jumping to conclusions. This might have nothing to do with Banner whatsoever.

But over the years, Fury had developed a habit of anticipating the worst. It was one of the biggest reasons his bad, one-eyed self was still alive.

"Keep me posted," he told Hogan, speaking into the little grate in his phone. "And don't worry about the minutes, cowboy. I've got plenty of them."

As Stark rocketed his way through the Triskelion's ventilation system, propelled by the plasma emitters in his boot heels, he kept an eye on the tiny, convex monitor in his gauntlet. It showed him a black maze on a blue background, with a red star near the middle of the maze and a green one not far from it.

The red star was the location of the intruders, the green one his own location. And they were getting closer together by the second.

Negotiating one last bend in the system, Stark slid a metal panel over his gauntlet monitor and focused on the grate up ahead. Then he extended his fists and rammed through it.

And shot out into the corridor beyond, perhaps ten yards behind the unsuspecting intruders.

In the fraction of a second it took them to register Stark's presence, he wheeled and hit them with all the power at his disposal. The resulting electromagnetic pulse barrage, visible only as a distortion of light waves, was enough to send one of the intruders flying backward, head over heels.

But the quartet behind him remained standing, unperturbed by Stark's assault. *An automatic adaptation*, he had time to reflect. Then he saw them raise their arms and felt the sudden, devastating force of their counterattack.

It flung him back the way he came, caught in a seething, spitting confluence of violet energy beams. But before it could send him crashing into the door at the opposite end of the corridor, he managed to veer off - taking an angle rather than resisting the barrage directly - and come back for

another pass.

The intruders were relentless, dogging him with their energy bursts. But Stark's armor was nothing if not fast, and it could turn on something considerably smaller than a dime. Making the most of its capabilities, he stayed a half step ahead of his adversaries' attentions.

However, he wasn't just reacting. All the while, he was setting up his next move, jockeying for a particular position. And when he got it, he didn't hesitate.

Spinning like a big power drill, Stark insinuated himself into his adversaries' midst. Then he crossed his arms over his chest and fired at the intruders on either side of him.

They jackknifed under the impact of his volley and hit the walls behind them. But Stark didn't stay to see if they lost consciousness. Instead, he darted down the corridor to gather himself for another pass.

As he came about, he saw the last two intruders standing in front of their fallen comrades, shielding them. But they weren't firing back. In

fact, one of them was preventing the other from doing so.

"Please," he called to Stark, "this is a mistake. There's no need for hostilities."

"Really," Stark said beneath his breath.

"I know this is hard to believe," the intruder insisted, "but we're not your enemies."

Stark was tempted to laugh. "I get it. You broke into our building and leveled our security details because you're *our friends*."

"Actually," said the intruder, "we didn't break into the Triskelion. At least, not in the sense you think we did. I trust you'll give us the opportunity to explain."

You place a lot of trust in someone you've been pounding like there's no tomorrow."

"That's true," said the intruder, "I do. And I feel comfortable doing so. After all, you *are* Anthony Stark."

"Don't believe everything you've seen on

television," the billionaire advised him.

"That won't be a problem," said the intruder, "since I've never seen a television in my life."

Stark looked at him askance.

The intruder turned his hands palm-up. "I really *would* like a chance to explain."

Just then, Stark heard a voice through his ear filter - the kind of voice Tinker Bell would have had, if J. M. Barrie had seen fit to give her some dialogue. "What's going on?" it asked.

Obviously, Jan had followed him in through the vent. And that meant Rogers would be by before long as well.

Stark didn't answer Jan's question directly. Instead, he contacted Hogan over his built-in comm system and said, "Hap, get me a conference room. My..."

Before he could finish, the door behind him seemed to implode. And before it had completely clattered to the ground, Steve Rogers was standing in the corridor.

He looked confused by what he saw But then, he had heard someone broke into the Triskelion. He had expected Stark to be trading shots with them, not negotiating with them.

The billionaire held up his hand for Rogers's benefit. Then he continued his message to Hogan: "As I was saying, *my friends* and I need to talk."

By the time Fury arrived at the Triskelion's helipad, he saw that Stark had already freshened up and changed his clothes, and was waiting with his hands in his expensively tailored pockets.

Walking across the asphalt surface, the wind from the bay whipping at him, the general tried to get a read on the billionaire's expression. Thanks to Happy Hogan, Fury knew what had transpired up to the point when the intruders surrendered to Iron Man.

What he didn't know was what they said after Stark got them in the conference room.

But as Fury joined Stark at the security door, the latter didn't look especially worried. *A good sign.*

"How was your trip?" Stark inquired, ever the charming host.

"Bumpier than the Cyclone at Coney Island. I understand we've got some unexpected guests."

"Just a handful."

"By the way, Money Man, in the future let's leave the interrogations to the experts."

"Sorry," said Stark. "Didn't mean to overstep my bounds."

"Where are your intruders now?"

"Three of them are in the infirmary. The other two are languishing in a detention cell."

Fury scowled. "How many guards in the infirmary?"

"A half dozen, not including Rogers. But I don't think the intruders will be causing any more trouble. They've voluntarily turned over their weapons and they're contrite about using them in the first place."

"Is that what they said?" -

"More or less."

"That's funny. They break into our house and take out two security teams without blinking, and suddenly they're contrite. What made them see the error of their ways?"

"*Me*," said the billionaire.

"Baloney," said Fury, who knew a lie when he heard one. "There's more to it than that."

"They said their encounters with the security teams were unfortunate. They were just trying to defend themselves."

Fury stopped in his tracks. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but weren't *they* the ones who broke into *our* place?"

"Clearly," said Stark. "But they claim it wasn't to do any damage. They just wanted to talk with someone in charge."

"Really? Well, *you're* someone in charge - and they did their best to take you out."

"Because they didn't recognize me," said Stark.

"They expected me to show up in a different Iron Man unit"

Fury didn't get it. The suit Stark had worn that morning was primitive in terms of its technology, but closely resembled the more recent models.

He said so.

"Actually," Stark explained, "they expected me to show up in a suit of black armor, made of a nanite-based material I haven't invented yet."

Fury felt as if he had stumbled into an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. "If it's not a lot of trouble, would you mind telling me what the hell you're talking about?"

"I don't mind at all," said Stark. And he told the general what the intruders had told *him*.

It took a few moments for Fury to absorb the information. "Well," he said, "*there's* something you don't hear every day."

"So you see," said Betty Ross, public relations

liaison for the government's high-profile Ultimates project, "it's not at all a matter of whom I like. It's the boss's decision that determines which operatives get to go public."

As she spoke, she watched platinum-haired Pietro Maximoff take three quick strides on the ice, leap into the air, execute a perfect spin, and then land with the grace of a professional skater.

Betty wasn't the only one who noticed, either. Every female skater in the place had been ogling Pietro and his movie-star good looks since he walked through the door.

Pietro's sister Wanda, who had gotten the nickname the Scarlet Witch from her SHIELD coworkers for good reason, pouted impatiently at Betty from the rail that separated the ice from the surrounding surface. With her formfitting red skating suit, she had attracted considerable attention from the males in the rink.

"And it was General Fury's decision to expose Natasha and Clint to public scrutiny," she said, "but not me or Pietro."

"That's right," said Betty, checking her wrist-

watch. "But really, I wouldn't take it personally. From a public relations standpoint, it's perfectly understandable."

"Then why don't I understand it?" Wanda asked.

Betty frowned. She had gone over the answer twice already. But for the hell of it, she would try one more time.

"As I told you," she said, "you've got three strikes against you. First, you're a foreigner."

Wanda dismissed the notion with a wave of her hand. "Anna Kournikova is a foreigner. I saw her on television just this morning in a shampoo commercial."

So that's what this is about, Betty thought. Fricking commercial endorsements. What happened to "I'm offering my services in exchange for the release of political prisoners?"

"Anna Kournikova isn't a mutant," Betty noted. *At least as far as we know.* "You and your brother were card-carrying members of the Mutant Brotherhood, for godsakes. And even if you weren't, you don't have the kind of persona

Americans like."

In the background, Pietro executed another midair spin and then glided out of it. But then, he was capable of making so many minute adjustments in such a short amount of time, there were few sports he couldn't master.

"What's wrong with my persona?" Wanda demanded.

Where do I begin? Betty asked herself. "Not a thing, if you're going for cold and haughty. But in this country, we like our public figures just the slightest bit approachable."

"But I'm beautiful," Wanda pointed out.

The public relations woman couldn't argue that. Wanda's features, like her brother's, looked as if they had been chiseled from some smooth, expensive stone.

"In this case," said Betty, "I'm afraid beautiful's not enough."

"Nonsense," Wanda retorted. "Beautiful is *always* enough. General Fury is just peeved that I won't

sleep with him."

That got Betty's attention. The last thing the Ultimates program needed was a sexual discrimination suit. "Did the general *ask* you to sleep with him?"

Wanda shrugged her slender shoulders. "Not in so many words. But a woman knows."

Sure she does. "Listen, girlfriend, I've got a press conference downtown at eleven-thirty. We'll talk another time."

Wanda looked at her, undoubtedly as dissatisfied as she was before. "Fine," she said. "Go to your press conference."

Like I need your permission, Betty thought. "Thanks," she said, and headed for the door.

But halfway there, she realized her bra straps had broken. *Both of them.* And at the damnedest time, considering she was supposed to greet a room full of reporters in just a few minutes.

She swore to herself I hate when this happens.

Then she remembered with whom she had been talking, and the expression on Wanda's face, and it occurred to her the bra straps might not be an accident

Casting a glance back over her shoulder, she saw Wanda was still standing by the rail. And she looked like the cat that had swallowed the canary.

They're right to call her a witch, Betty thought. Or something that rhymes with it.

As she emerged from the rink onto the street, she did her best to ignore her undergarment problem and focus on getting a taxi. However, she hadn't quite made it to the intersection before her cell phone went off.

Fishing it out of her skirt pocket, she snapped it open and said, "Ross here."

"It's Fury," came the response. "Send someone else to the press conference. I need to speak with you."

Betty was surprised. "What about?"

"The future," the general told her.

3

Sitting at the sleek black table in the Triskelion's main conference room, Stark used one of its built-in computer terminals to go over the security-cam images of his encounter with the intruders.

All in all, he reflected, I didn't do that badly. His approach through the ventilation system caught his adversaries off-guard, as he had intended. And his spinning entry into their midst had worked like a charm as well.

However, the last two intruders had been given an open shot at him as he finished his pass. That they chose not to take advantage of it didn't excuse his error, or assure him that another enemy would be as generous.

Got to watch that, Stark told himself

Next time, he would do something unpredictable, like pull up sharply and loop around. If that's even possible under a ten-foot ceiling.

He was considering his other options when the door slid open and Natasha Romanov appeared on the threshold. As usual, she was wearing an all-black ensemble, one of the reasons she had been given the code name Black Widow.

The other was how many enemies she was said to have dispatched in her career as a Russian spy. Fortunately, she worked for the Ultimates these days.

"May I come in?" she asked.

With her auburn hair, her exotic features, and her slender, supple body, Natasha was difficult to deny. Not only now, Stark couldn't help thinking, but that other time as well.

"Of course," he said.

She pulled out the chair next to him and sat down. "Anything new on the intruder front?"

"Not yet. We're waiting for test results."

"You think they're mutants?"

"They seem to have materialized out of thin air. We have to check out every possibility."

"Then you don't believe their story?"

"For now," he said, "I'm approaching it with an open mind."

Natasha nodded. "That's probably the best approach."

Stark had a feeling she hadn't come just for an update on the intruders. A moment later, she confirmed it for him.

"Listen," she said, "you know that moment of... camaraderie we shared in the men's room, just before our battle with the Chitauri?"

He remembered it both fondly and in great detail. "I suppose camaraderie would be one way to describe it."

"I just hope you weren't thinking it was a portent of things to come. People do things in stressful circumstances they would never do otherwise."

Not that I regret it for a minute."

Stark found himself smiling at the novelty of the situation. "Hang on a second. Are you telling me you just want to be friends?"

"Not really," said Natasha. "I feel uncomfortable working alongside friends. Comrades is more what I had in mind."

He looked at her. "Comrades... ?"

"I mean," she said, "it couldn't have been a meaningful liaison for you either. Not when you have so many attractive women at your beck and call."

Actually, Stark had gotten more satisfaction from his brief encounter with Natasha than from entire weekends with other women. But his life had been so crammed full of stockholder meetings and test flights and power lunches, there hadn't been time for him to contemplate an encore.

His sex life over the last few weeks had been rife with Terri Topasandras - utterly unplanned events, barely considered before or after. The way he lived, that was all he could handle.

Besides, Stark couldn't forget the growth lodged in his brain. It made anything even approaching an ongoing relationship problematical at best.

"Unfortunately," Stark said, "they're not as attractive as you make them out to be. And most of them are rather shallow. But the more I think about it, the more I agree with you - people who work together shouldn't get involved. What happened before the battle was... a pregame warm-up, nothing more."

"Then you understand," she said, obviously pleased with him.

"Absolutely," he told her.

"Good," said Natasha, getting up from her chair. "I'm glad we had this conversation. It's made me feel better."

And with that, she left. A few moments later, the room was as silent as before she arrived.

Stark should have felt better as well, having dodged yet another threat to his bachelorhood. But he didn't. He felt irritated.

Why is that? he wondered.

Henry Pym had always loved to immerse himself in the world beneath his microscope.

He didn't get people sometimes - why they did certain things, whom they embraced as friends. Sometimes he didn't even get himself. Those were the occasions when he did things he came to regret, things that made him feel mean and stupid.

Mean was bad. Pym knew that from growing up with a father who took a belt to him every chance he got. But stupid was even worse. There was nothing he hated more than someone speaking down to him, giving him less than the respect he felt he deserved.

Hell, he had developed a method of shrinking people to the size of insects, and another that made them as big as houses. And the helmet he had designed allowed him to direct the activities of ants. If those accomplishments didn't translate into respect, he didn't know what the hell would.

Still, there were those who insisted on belittling

him. Saying, for instance, that Bruce Banner was a superior geneticist.

Well, Pym thought, Banner's penned up in a damned holding unit down in the basement, and I'm the one they brought in to analyze the blood samples they took from the intruders. So in the final analysis, who's the more successful scientist?

Just then, he heard the door slide open. Gotta go, he thought, pulling himself out of the microscopic world with something like physical pain. When he finally looked up from his microscope, he saw Nick Fury standing there.

The general looked like a man with ground glass in his underwear. 'What's the verdict?' he asked without preamble.

"Well," said Pym, "I can safely and unequivocally say these people are human."

It was a concern because the Chitauri had possessed the ability to make themselves look human. These intruders, on the other hand, were the genuine articles.

"Diseases?" Fury asked.

"None that are still alive," said Pym. "But they've got an interesting collection of dead ones. I found pieces of critters in their blood that would make your hair stand on end. I mean," he added in recognition of the general's shaved head, "if you had any."

"These critters," said the general, "you've seen them before? Or at least read about them?"

"Some. Others I've never seen."

"Any idea where they came from?"

Pym shrugged. "They could be designer viruses. The kinds of things a terrorist organization might have developed. If that's so, we'd better start working on a vaccine now, because they'll make the Ebola strain look like heat rash."

"How do you suppose these people got exposed to such viruses?"

"Hard to say. Maybe they were guinea pigs - the ones who managed to survive. Or maybe they lived in a part of the world that has an unusual

number of exotic microorganisms."

"Which one do you think it is?"

Pym shook his head. "Neither. But you talked to these people, right? Did anything they said provide a clue?"

Fury didn't respond for a while. When he finally spoke, it was in a more contemplative voice.

"Is it possible," he asked, "in your professional opinion, that these viruses are from an era two centuries from now?"

The scientist chuckled at the absurdity of the suggestion. "What do you mean?"

"I didn't tell you," said Fury, "because I didn't want to influence your analysis, but the intruders have told Stark they're from two hundred years in the future."

At some point, the scientist realized his mouth was hanging open. He closed it. "Time travel?"

It was probably just a story the intruders had concocted. But if there was even the least bit of

truth to it...

"Thanks," said Fury. "Stick around. I may need you for something else."

As he left: the room, Pym's mind was aflutter with the possibilities. Time travel...

Tony Stark wasn't happy.

He had things to think about. Important things, like the Tomorrow Men, as Fury called them, not to mention business decisions that would significantly impact the economies of a half dozen Asian and Latin American countries.

But instead, as he stared out the window of his office at the Triskelion, he was thinking about Natasha Romanov.

The arch of her back. The tilt of her chin. Things he had barely noticed before, which he suddenly couldn't get out of his mind.

It was that line she had given him: Comrades is more what I had in mind.

No one had ever said that to him. No one. And

now that someone had, he couldn't accept it.

Stark had been obsessed most of his life with one thing or another. That was how he had gotten to be who he was. But obsession with a woman... that was an entirely new experience for him.

And he didn't like it.

As he thought that, he saw a reflection in the reinforced glass of his office window - in addition to his own. TUrning, he saw he wasn't alone in the room anymore.

The new arrival was tall and rawboned, with a mane of long, yellow hair and a beard to match. The kind of guy who would have stood out in a crowd even if he hadn't been wearing a sleeveless, black leather jumpsuit with a quartet of round, silvery energy nodes distributed across his chest, or a broad metal belt of the kind one saw in a wrestling ring.

Then there was the weapon in his hand - a long-handled job made of some bright, shiny metal, half axe and half mallet, that would have looked impressive in a museum collection. And as formidable as it appeared, it was even more so.

After all, it could unleash the power of a lightning storm.

Which made its owner formidable too. Something out of this world, to hear him tell it.

Thor, thought Stark. The god of thunder - though the billionaire still wasn't certain he believed it.

"Where have you been?" he asked his colleague.

It came out funny, as if he were implying that Thor should have been present to deal with the intruders the day before. But he wasn't implying that at all."

Thor and Rogers and Stark himself were volunteers. It was only the duty each of them felt to his fellow human beings - and, of course, to his teammates - that kept him coming back to the Triskelion.

So Stark wasn't posing the question to elicit an excuse. He asked only because the answer was always so entertaining.

"Muspelheim," said Thor. "The Realm of Fire. To show Surtur he can't cross the Nine Worlds with

impunity."

"Surtur... ?" said the billionaire.

"Lord of the Fire Giants, Also known as Flint-Spark, Smoke Maker, Flesh Scorcher, and Burner of Forests."

Don't invite him to the same party as Smokey the Bear, Stark thought. But what he said was, "Oh, that Surtur."

Thor smiled at him, flashing a row of flawless white teeth. "Having fun at my expense, are we?"

"Naturally," said the billionaire. "What are friends for?"

Thor chuckled into his beard. From the beginning, he had warmed to the casual tone Stark took with him, and his matter-of-fact approach to Thor's unusual attributes and opinions. But then, Stark had Oprah's private number on his cell phone. He was a rather difficult man to impress.

"So what's going on here?" asked Thor. "When I returned to Midgard, I had a message that we had been invaded."

Midgard, Stark had come to understand, was the planet Earth - as opposed to the other eight worlds in the cosmology offered by Scandinavian legend. "In retrospect," he said, "'invaded' seems a little overdramatic. But we do have visitors. From the future, if they can be taken at their word."

Thor's brow knit. "The future?"

"Hard to believe," said Stark, "I know." Even for a man who claims to be a thunder god, apparently. "But you may find it less so once you've met them."

"Then you believe them?"

Stark shrugged. "Let's just say I'm reserving judgment."

"What are they doing here?" Thor asked.

"That," said the billionaire, "is still a matter of conjecture. They wanted to wait until we were all present before they revealed their purpose here - or should I say now."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

Just the gentleman who laid the smackdown on the Burner of Forests. "Absolutely nothing," said Stark.

If there were an award for couch potatoes, Bruce Banner would have been a world-class contender.

He didn't think much anymore about Warshovsky and Crespo, the afternoon-shift guards patrolling the security chamber in which his holding unit was situated. They had become like wallpaper. Unless they spoke to him, they were just there.

But television? That was a different story entirely.

Unfortunately, the scientist didn't have access to all television. He could only watch those channels that weren't likely to get him excited - that wouldn't get his volatile biochemistry in a boil and turn him into a murdering behemoth again.

Like the rerun of The Brady Bunch he was watching at the moment. Nothing much to get excited about there - except, of course, that the little kids were getting the short end of the stick.

Banner had been an only child, but he couldn't help sympathizing with Cindy and Bobby. They meant well. But somehow, they always wound up taking the blame. In fact -

With an effort, he stopped himself.

Listen to me, Banner thought miserably. Is this what Yve been reduced to?

He was like those housewives who sat and watched soap operas all day, waiting to see if Anne-Marie's baby belonged to Lance or his half-brother Jeremy Except when the soaps were over, those housewives could drag their fannies over to the mall.

Banner had to stay home. Forever, as far as he could tell.

Pressing one of the two green studs on his remote, he left Bobby and Cindy to their own devices and switched to the History Channel. You can always depend on the History Channel.

He found himself watching black-and-white footage of Adolf Hitler that appeared to have been taken from a newsreel. The little dictator

was ranting in front of rank after rank of German soldiers, inspiring them to go out and conquer the world.

The narrator - a veteran actor whose name Banner couldn't remember - was saying that France had fallen and the British were on their heels. And while some thought the United States would remain unscathed by the Axis, others were more realistic.

So even before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Franklin Roosevelt authorized a secret program to design a superlative fighting man. A super-soldier.

The scene on the television switched to an unassuming redbrick building in New Jersey, now boarded up and surrounded with barbed-wire fencing. It was there, according to the narrator - whose name Banner still couldn't remember - that a group of biospecialists got together and laid out the super-soldier blueprint.

Though the program was expected to eventually produce an entire regiment, it never fulfilled that promise. Instead, it wound up creating but a single superb specimen whom the public came to

know as Captain America.

At first, people thought he was a figurehead, meant to inspire American troops. But those who fought alongside him came back with stories of prodigious strength and unbelievable agility and something approaching outright invulnerability.

They were only slight exaggerations.

But in the spring of 1945, in the midst of a strike against a German military base in Iceland, Captain America was lost in combat - and presumed dead. Given the fact that he was the only success to come out of the super-soldier program, it didn't seem likely the world would see his ilk again.

Except to Bruce Banner.

He was certain that the formula that created Captain America could be duplicated. And the government, dealing with terrorists now instead of Nazis, was willing to back the chance that he was right.

Suddenly, Banner found himself with a mess of funding. He had never been so pumped in his life.

But creating a super-soldier turned out to be harder than it looked.

Banner had always been first in his class, all through college and then grad school. He had always been the smartest person he knew. It shouldn't have been so difficult to accomplish something someone else had accomplished sixty years earlier.

Granted, his predecessors were intelligent people, maybe the best the world had to offer at the time. But they were working with primitive computers, without the twenty-first century's understanding of cell biology.

For godsakes, he thought, back in the forties they hadn't come up with a vaccine for polio yet. How advanced could the super-soldier brain trust have been?

Still, Banner had foundered. Every approach he tried led him to a dead end. His grant money was running out and he hadn't produced a damned thing to show for it.

Then, just when he thought he was completely screwed, he received his first set of promising

results. He was onto something - he was sure of it. Unfortunately, there was no time to refine his formula, no time to test his hypotheses.

No time to arrange for human subjects. So instead of exposing someone else to his procedure, as those other scientists had done, Bruce had the temerity to test it on himself.

Big mistake.

The formula he developed made him big and strong, all right. Even bigger and stronger than Captain America. But it also made a rampaging monster out of him.

A hulk, as it were.

His mind reduced to that of a madman, he tore up Chelsea Piers on the west side of Manhattan. That incident earned him the scrutiny of a cadre of doctors, charged with monitoring his blood three times a day for what they called "Hulk cells."

It was a short time later, in one of life's all-time greatest ironies, that the world's original supersoldier - a guy named Steve Rogers - was fished

out of an ice floe in the Arctic Ocean by a team of flabbergasted marine biologists.

Suddenly, Captain America was back "And in light of recent events," said the TV narrator, whose name continued to elude Banner, "we couldn't be happier about it."

At the time, Banner was happy about it too. After all, he would enjoy access to Rogers's blood. He could analyze it with the help of a high-powered microscope and get some insights into Captain America's miraculous metabolism.

But it didn't work out the way he had hoped. Even with the blood samples, he couldn't duplicate the super-soldier formula. Disappointed and frustrated by his failure, he cracked a little.

That was when he did something stupid, something he wished like hell he hadn't even thought of. Mixing the blood of the resurrected Captain America with the serum that had made Banner the Hulk, he rolled up his sleeve and injected it all into his vein.

By the time the Ultimates corralled him and forced him to revert to his original form, he had

killed people. Hundreds of them. He had brought buildings crashing down - buildings that still had human beings in them. He tried not to think of that on a daily basis, but it was always lurking in the back of his mind.

Like the Hulk himself.

Unfortunately, it wasn't just in Banner's mind that the creature survived. It was in his cells as well, because his Hulk intrabodies had bonded with his DNA. Permanently.

So, despite the cocktail of medications he was taking, he could turn into the Hulk at the drop of an adrenalin surge. Which meant that he would never be allowed to leave his holding unit.

He had screwed up, and it seemed likely he would pay for his mistake every day for the rest of his life.

As he thought that, the door to the security chamber slid aside. It didn't make a sound loud enough for Banner to hear through his transparent barrier. But thanks to the change in his guards' behavior, he was aware of it all the same.

"Ten-shun!" said Warshovsky.

"At ease, Lieutenant," said a voice Banner recognized.

Its owner crossed the space between the door and the transparent wall of the holding unit, his stride as purposeful and assured as always. When he reached the barrier, he placed his hand on it.

Just as he always does. Banner knew the man too well.

Nick Fury was the American general serving as the head of SHIELD, which meant he was in charge of the Triskelion. And therefore, Banner added, in charge of me.

People who met Fury for the first time always commented on his resemblance to Samuel L. Jackson, the actor. Banner didn't see it. He thought Fury looked like a biology professor he had known back at Newark University.

Except, of course, for the black eye patch he wore, covering up what was reportedly an empty socket as well as most of the scar tissue around it. Fury had never told Banner how he lost the

eye, but the scientist had dreamed up an interesting scenario or two.

In his holding unit, he had time to come up with such strange tales. Lots of it.

Getting up from his easy chair, Banner padded across his floor on bare feet. He didn't feel compelled to wear shoes or socks anymore, any concern with formality long since discarded.

"Banner," said Fury. "How are you?"

"As well as can be expected," said the scientist.

The general seldom came to visit him. Banner wondered why he had done so this time.

"I'm guessing you need my input on something."

"Actually," said Fury, "we do." He briefed Banner on the situation. "I'll see to it you're patched in on a closed circuit. Two-way, so you can interact with the intruders."

Banner nodded, causing his glasses to slide down his nose. He pushed them back up again. "I'll be happy to help."

"I appreciate it," said Fury.

Then he turned smartly, the way military people were trained to turn, and left the room.

Banner appreciated the fact that the general hadn't lingered. It would only have underlined the uncomfortable distinction between them. The scientist, after all, was a man in a cage, and Fury was the fellow whose orders had put him there.

Not that the general was a bad man. He just has some tough decisions to make, Banner allowed.

And one of them, apparently, was what to do with the intruders in the green and white suits.

Steve Rogers looked around the black briefing room table at the other components of the government's highly publicized Ultimates team. With the exception of Thor, whose physique and long-handled hammer set him well apart from the man on the street, no one there looked like he was capable of foiling a house burglary, much less a full-scale extraterrestrial invasion.

Stark was surprisingly unimposing outside his armor, which was difficult for him to wear for more than a couple of hours at a time. Jan was a resourceful woman with unusual abilities, but she was too slim and feminine to scare anyone. And Rogers himself, while more muscular than the average Joe, gave no indication of the considerable power he could bring to bear.

Probably the least impressive person in attendance was Bruce Banner, and he wasn't even there in the flesh. He was only monitoring the meeting through a wireless comm link from his holding unit in the heart of the Triskelion.

The man who had once been in charge of Fury's super-soldier program was reduced to little more than a prisoner, thanks to the murderous rampage he had gone on as the Hulk. And the general had no plans to release Banner any time soon, considering he could cut another swath of destruction at the drop of a hat.

But Banner was still a genius, by all accounts, and Fury had wanted to hear the guy's take on the Tomorrow Men. And Banner had been happy to oblige, considering he didn't have a whole lot else to do.

Banner's situation made Rogers understand how close he had come to being transformed into a monster himself. If the scientists who had built him up into a super-soldier had adopted Banner's approach instead of their own, Rogers too might have lived out his life in a high-security cage.

But he hadn't thought about that back in the forties. All he had known was that his country required a hero, and that he was in a position to give it what it needed. Possible side effects? No one had mentioned any.

Was that because the scientists back then were naive? Rogers wondered. Or just too sharp to make the mistake Banner made?

Just then, the door opened and General Fury came in. And he wasn't alone.

As Rogers watched, the so-called Tomorrow Men filed into the room. They were all wearing the same green-on-white uniform, all sporting billiard-ball haircuts.

Which are considered fashionable these days, he reminded himself. Stop living in the past, old-timer.

Taking the chairs left for them, which were all on the same side of the briefing table, the Tomorrow Men sat down. One of them, who was swarthier than the others, seemed to stare at Rogers.

"Something wrong?" Rogers asked him.

"No," said the Tomorrow Man, in a surprisingly melodic voice, "not at all. It's just that I never expected to meet you in the flesh."

The woman - whose head was shaven as clean as those of her comrades - smiled with what seemed like unmitigated delight. "'You're Steve Rogers."

"Mister Rogers," said another of the Tomorrow Men, a fellow with a long face and a deeply cleft chin, "it's a pleasure to meet you." And his companions echoed the sentiment.

"You know me?" Rogers asked.

"Of course," said the man with the long face. "Everyone knows the exploits of Steve Rogers."

Rogers was surprised. After all, Captain America was the celebrity. Steve Rogers was just the guy

who tagged along with him.

The dark-skinned man smiled at him. "Are you surprised your civilian name is known in our time?"

"Frankly," said Rogers, "I'm surprised it was known in this time."

"For those of you who haven't had the pleasure," said Stark, "allow me to make introductions."

He went on to identify the intruders one by one. The man with the long face was Weyland - their leader, apparently. The woman, an athletic-looking specimen with big, blue eyes, was Haggerty. The dark-skinned fellow was Chadaputra. The fourth Tomorrow Man, a sober-looking Asian, was Matsubayashi. The fifth, a brawny individual with a spray of freckles across his wide, flat nose, was Kosar.

Five of them, Rogers thought, because temporal transit is rough, and they didn't know how many of them would survive it. Or so the intruders had said.

"We've come a long way," said Weyland. "We

appreciate the opportunity to speak with you."

"We know it's difficult for you to accept the fact that we're from the future," said Haggerty "However, we came prepared to dispel your doubts."

"How?" asked Thor.

"By providing personal details no one else is likely to know," said Chadaputra. "For instance, the name of your family's pet dog. Garm, wasn't it?"

Thor chuckled. "So it was."

"He lived to the ripe old age of seventeen before he succumbed to a hip dysplasia problem. His death came the same weekend as that of your mother."

Thor's smile faded. "Correct again."

"It was in your memoirs," said Chadaputra, "the ones you'll write more than thirty years from now." He turned to Fury. "Growing up in Brooklyn, your best friend was Isadore Cohen. His family operated an establishment known as a candy

store."

Fury didn't confirm it. However, he also didn't deny it.

"On Saturday nights," said Chadaputra, "between the ages of eight and twelve, you and Isadore would assemble Sunday editions of The New York Times for customers to purchase the following morning."

The general remained silent. His only response was the twitching of a muscle in his jaw.

"That," said Chadaputra, "was in your memoirs." He looked at the image of Banner on the screen in front of him. "You, Doctor, have two extra nipples protruding from your abdomen, several centimeters below the traditional pair. While they appear to be nothing more than moles, they were mentioned prominently in a study of - "

"We get the idea," said Banner, cutting him off

"You sound offended," said Weyland, obviously concerned. "I assure you, Doctor, that wasn't our intention. As you're a scientist, we thought you would - "

"Right," Banner interjected. "Let's move on."

"Actually," said Fury, "I think we've heard enough. What we need to know," he told Weyland, "is why you're here."

The Tomorrow Man frowned. "I know this will sound bizarre to you, General." He looked around the table at the Ultimates. "To all of you. But we've come to change the past."

4

"The past ... ?" Fury echoed, beating Stark to the punch.

"Our past," Chadaputra elaborated. "What you would call the present."

"And you want to change it... why?" Jan wondered.

"If I'm too specific," said Weyland, "I'll jeopardize the integrity of the timeline. But I can

tell you this: In the next two hundred and thirty years, civilization will devolve. Nations will vanish, to be replaced by regional dictatorships. Large portions of the world will become lawless, recognizing allegiance to no government at all. Wars will become commonplace and infinitely more brutal than you have known them to be. Slavery, torture, mass execution... there will be no end to the misery."

Sounds inviting, Stark thought.

"All the evils you have buried or are attempting to bury in the twenty-first century will claw their way to the surface again - all because of a single organization, which has managed thus far to remain undetected as it recruits its personnel and builds its bases and stockpiles its armaments. If left unmolested, it will go on preparing just a little while longer. Then it will strike everywhere at once, and no one on Earth will be able to stand against it.

"Its name," said Weyland, "is Tiber."

"Never heard of it," said Stark.

"Me either," Jan chimed in.

Fury shifted in his chair. "I have."

Surprised, Stark looked at his colleague - and he wasn't the only one. "Holding out on us, General?"

Fury spread his hands. "All we had was a name and scattered reports, held together by the same modus operandi. Humanitarian food caravans disappearing into thin air. Drug trafficking operations that would be there one day and gone the next. Raids on precious-metal repositories that left dozens dead in their wakes.

"All because of Tiber. We're sure of that. But we haven't been able to identify any of their members or track them to their hideouts. A couple of locations have been suggested, but nothing concrete. Just the occasional rumor."

"Tiber is more than a rumor," said Weyland.

"What do they want?" asked Stark.

"World domination," said Weyland.

Thor smiled. "Spooky."

"With all due respect," said Weyland, "it would be a mistake not to take Tiber seriously. In this case, world domination isn't a madman's fantasy. It's a realistic objective."

"Which is realized only briefly," said Chadaputra, "but paves the way for the world to come."

"So," said Rogers, summing it up, "if Tiber isn't crippled in our time, they'll end up ruining the world in yours."

Weyland nodded. "Which is why it's so important to us to clean out their nests."

"When you put it that way..." said Jan.

"Tiber," Thor said thoughtfully "As in Tiber River'?"

Chadaputra turned to him. "A logical conclusion, but an incorrect one. Apparently, the organization's founder was an individual named Tiber. He first turned up in a monastery in France during the Middle Ages - the fourteenth century, to be precise."

"A monk?" asked Rogers.

"He was studying to become one," said Chadaputra. "However, before he took his vows, he experienced a change of heart. Rejecting the notion that the world had been created by a supreme being, he slaughtered every last member of the religious order that inhabited the monastery claimed the place for his own, and drew to him an army from the dregs of the medieval landscape."

"I never read this in any history book," said Banner, his skepticism evident on the monitor screens in front of them.

Weyland smiled politely. "By now, Doctor, you must know that not every piece of valuable information is recorded for posterity I imagine you've heard that history is written by the victors. In certain instances, those victors have found it useful to remain absent from the accounts of their victories.

"That was what happened in Tiber's case. With the help of his army, he secured a large part of central France and ruled it sternly. But it wasn't enough to satisfy him. With success came ambition, and he was intelligent enough to set his sights higher than others might have.

"His only impediment was a rare blood disease, which his physicians said would make him infirm before his time and ultimately shorten his lifespan. However, it would be years before it had any visible effect on him.

"Tiber wasn't discouraged by the news. He was already forty-six years old, and most men of his primitive era were dead by that age anyway. If anything, he was inspired by his limitation, determined to show that he could transcend it - that, despite everything, he could seize the greatest prize imaginable."

"And what was that?" asked Stark.

"The world in its entirety," said Haggerty "Every last clod and stone of it. But he had profited from his study of earlier conquerors like Alexander and Julius Caesar. He knew there was no army large enough to take and hold so vast an empire. Eventually, his forces would be spread too thin to put down rebellions, which were certain to crop up from time to time.

"To have any real hope of conquering the world, Tiber needed more political power, and more wealth, and more shrewd, educated men like

himself. But it would take time to amass all three, and time was Tiber's enemy. , ,

"In the end, he did something we believe to be unprecedented in the history of our species - he created a scheme for world domination that would span hundreds of years, the culmination of which he would never live to see. But when it finally came to fruition, those who benefited from it would speak the name Tiber in awe and gratitude, and those ground underfoot by it would curse him as no one had ever been cursed before."

"Lovely," said Jan.

"And impressive," said Thor. "For a mortal, of course."

To plan something that wouldn't take place until the next millennium? To leave a legacy so ambitious, so powerful, that it would outlive its creator by several centuries?

Stark found it impressive as well.

"What do you want us to do?" he asked.

"Unfortunately," said Weyland, "we can't address Tiber in this era - not directly. And even if we could, there are only five of us. We don't have the resources you do."

In Stark's view, the Tomorrow Men had-plenty of resources. His neck was still stiff from getting bludgeoned with one of them. But he refrained from bringing that up.

Weyland leaned forward in his chair. "We need you to destroy Tiber - utterly. And we have obtained information that can assist you in that effort."

"Including," Fury said hopefully, "the locations out of which they operate?"

It was a logical assumption. But Weyland shook his head. "Unfortunately, we don't know everything about your era. And when it comes to Tiber, we know very little."

Thor looked at him askance. "No offense, but I find that difficult to believe. You know intimate details of my life, and those of my colleagues. If you knew enough about the layout of the Triskelion to appear safely inside her."

"And," said Rogers, picking up the thread, "you know about the fourth-century monk who founded the organization. So why wouldn't you know where its operations were?"

Stark had to admit it was a valid question.

Weyland sighed. "What you did, even in your personal lives, was eventually public knowledge. The layout of this facility was public - in fact, there are remnants of it still standing in my time. But the location of Tiber's nests remained a secret, to the final dying breath of its last adherent.

"The regimes that rule the world in my era might have exhausted their resources to find these places. However, there was no reason for them to do so. As long as Tiber was no longer a threat to them, they couldn't have cared less what secrets were contained in some hollow, predator-infested mountain."

"But," said Jan, a note of irony in her voice, "you'd like us to destroy Tiber."

"We would," Weyland confirmed. "And since we believe this was a critical time in the perfection

of Tiber's security systems, we would like you to do it as quickly as possible."

Well, Stark thought, at least he's not shy about it.

"We'll need some time to absorb this," Fury advised the Tomorrow Men. "In the meantime, I'll see to it that you're escorted back to your accommodations."

Weyland looked as though he would have preferred a more immediate response. But he said, "Thank you."

With a tap of a stud built into the underside of the table, the general summoned a couple of guards. Seeing them enter the room, the intruders got up from their seats and filed out.

Leaving Stark and the other Ultimates to kick around what they had heard.

Clint Barton, three-time Olympic gold medalist, stood at the edge of the Triskelion's black asphalt helipad and fit a red-fletched arrow to his titanium-alloy bow. All his arrows had red fletching - a warning to his enemies.

Barton's target, a cone-shaped, open-framework green buoy, was rocking gently in the frothy chop of the Upper Bay. A seagull was sitting on top of it, training a hungry eye on the waves.

Barton's magnifying goggles could have showed him the texture of the skin on the gull's feet if he had needed them to. As it was, they gave him a nice, clear picture of the bell dangling in the middle of the open cone.

It was nearly a quarter mile away, with a variable crosswind of what he estimated was five to fifteen miles an hour. Piece of cake, Barton told himself.

Lifting his bow, he took aim at the bell and pulled back on the thin, flexible cable that served him as a bowstring. Then, allowing for wind, the effect of gravity, and the rhythm of the waves, he released the shaft.

A moment later, the bell rang out clear and true. Barton could barely hear it, but he didn't have to. The goggles had shown him the arrow striking its target.

"Any idea what's going on with these Tomorrow

Men?" Wanda asked.

She was standing behind Barton, leaning against the wall with her arms folded across her chest. Looking seductive, he thought. But then, she always looked seductive.

Not that he would ever consider making a move on her. For one thing, he had a loving girlfriend and a couple of great kids, and he knew better than to do anything that might mess that up. For another thing, he had a rule against mixing work with play. And for a third, Wanda was at heart just a tease, too wrapped up in her brother to get involved with any-one else.

In fact, it was only lately that he saw them apart occasionally. Most of the time, they were like Siamese twins - and very bizarre Siamese twins at that.

"Fury and the others are talking to them now," he said.

"They never tell me or Pietro anything," said Wanda. "It's as if we're not even part of the team."

"Of course you are," said the archer. 'You're the part that gets dirty. The part that goes into dark, smelly places and rubs up against the cockroaches."

"What a delightful image," said Wanda, making no effort to conceal her revulsion, "but what does it have to do with our being snubbed by General Fury?"

"If you were in the business of trusting people with your secrets," said Barton, "would you trust them to those most likely to be captured and tortured?"

Silence. Obviously, Wanda had seen his point.

"Hell," he continued, "I told them I don't want to know what's going on. Then I won't have to worry about giving anything up."

"You're being facetious, of course."

"Not at all," Barton said.

Removing a second shaft from the quiver strapped to his thigh, he knocked it and took aim again. Drew back on his string. Made minute

adjustments. Let the arrow fly.

Again, the bell pealed plaintively across the waters of the bay. Barton slipped another arrow from his quiver.

"Then you don't mind being left out of things?" Wanda asked.

"Meetings aren't my idea of a good time."

As far as the archer was concerned, there would be plenty of big brains in the room saying plenty of big-brain type things. They wouldn't miss his two cents' worth of junior college insights.

"Doesn't anything bother you?" Wanda demanded, obviously hoping he would confide in her that something did.

Barton smiled to himself as he snugged the arrow against his string. "Not a thing."

"I don't believe you," said Wanda, a hint of pique in her voice. "I think you're having a joke at my expense."

The wind was kicking up more than before, so the

archer aimed a little to his right. Then he pulled back until the fletching was tickling his ear, and fired.

Like the other shafts, this one shot across the water, headed unerringly for the buoy. Barton watched it with a degree of satisfaction, anticipating the inevitable convergence of arrowhead and moving target.

Until it missed.

Not by more than an inch or two. But to him, it might as well have been a city block.

"I never miss," he mumbled to himself, an unfamiliar heat creeping into his cheeks.

It wasn't a brag - it was a well-known fact. Geese flew south for the winter. Water froze at thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit. And "Hawkeye" Barton hit his marks.

As he came to grips with his failure, he saw Wanda turn and touch the door control. That was when it hit him.

"Hey," Barton called after her, "that was you!"

"Excuse me?" she said, as the door opened.

"You made me miss!"

Wanda shrugged. "You think so?"

Barton scowled at her. "Damned right I do."

"All right," she said, rolling her eyes, "if it makes you feel better, go ahead."

Then Wanda entered the building and left him standing there by himself.

Barton swore beneath his breath. It was her, all right. And he would prove it.

Freeing another arrow from his quiver, he knocked it and got the bell in his sights again. Then he pulled back, allowed for a respite in the wind, and let go.

The shaft rang the bell as surely as the first two.

He grunted. "Freakin witch."

Suddenly, he heard a voice in his ear: "Actually, it was me who made you miss."

Whirling, Barton managed to catch a glimpse of a dark gray blur retreating across the expanse of the helipad. Pietro, he thought, with an air of resignation.

If it wasn't one of them, it was the other.

In the absence of the Tomorrow Men, Fury scanned the faces of the Ultimates, looking for a preview of what they thought. "So?" he asked finally

"If Tiber's as bad as the general suggests," said Stark, "we've got to pounce on this."

"I agree," said Banner.

"Then you believe these people are really from the future?" asked Jan.

"I don't know," said Banner. "Time travel is a little out of my league."

"Mine too," said Rogers, "unless it's the kind that involves being placed on ice."

"Actually," said Stark, "I know a bit about this

subject"

"How so?" asked Banner from his video screen.

"Some years ago," said Stark, "a guy came to me with plans for a time-travel device. Wanted me to back him. I didn't take him seriously until my research guys told me time travel was possible. In fact, scientists had already made it happen in a particle accelerator, using quarks as guinea pigs."

"Quarks?" said Thor.

"A subatomic particle," Banner explained.

Fury jerked a thumb over his shoulder, indicating the Tomorrow Men. "Those guys aren't subatomic particles."

Stark smiled. "So I noticed. And when we calculated how much power we would need to transport a person into the past - even to a point only a couple of minutes earlier than his departure - it was more than the sun generates in a decade. But the real problem wasn't power. It was causality."

"Causality... ?" Fury echoed.

"Also known as the Grandfather Paradox," said Stark

Banner picked up the thread, eager as the kid in third grade who couldn't keep his hand down.

"Say you traveled back in time and met your own maternal grandfather. If you wanted to - or even if you didn't want to - you could keep him from meeting your grandmother, which would prevent your mother from being born, which would in turn prevent you from being born. So if you never existed in the first place, how could you ever have gone back in time?"

"You're making my head hurt," said Rogers.

"What you're saying," said Jan, "is you would be screwing up time somehow?"

"It gets worse," said Banner. "The laws of physics only work when cause precedes effect. If you go back in time and change things, effects are divorced from their causes. It's not just time going out the window - it's Natural Law."

"Not necessarily," said Thor. He leaned forward,

resting his powerful arms on the table. "Isn't your action in the past a cause as well?"

Banner frowned. "Yes, in a manner of speaking. But an effect can't have two causes - only one. The universe has to work the same way all the time. A law can only be a law if it's infallible."

Thor looked sympathetic. "Not even Odin is infallible."

Fury was skeptical about the whole Odin-and-Asgard thing, and had been all along. Obviously, Thor was an individual who boasted some crazy-ass supernatural abilities. But a lot of people thought his talk about gods and demons was delusional, and the general was tempted to agree with them.

"So time travel is inadvisable," he interjected, getting the discussion back on track, "because you might prevent yourself from existing - maybe even put a dent in the way things work. I get all that. But you're saying it's possible, right?"

"That's my understanding," said Stark.

"Then it's also possible that our friends are

telling the truth? That they came from the future, for god-sakes?" Fury scowled. "I'm having a hard time getting on board with that."

"Because it's insane," said Rogers.

"Says the man who slept in an iceberg for sixty years." Stark looked around the table. "My researchers told me time travel would require huge stores of power. But two hundred years in the future, they may be capable of harnessing such power - by tapping into energy sources we've yet to consider."

Thor shook his head. "I'm not satisfied these people are what they say they are."

"Me either," said Jan.

The general scanned their faces, sparing Banner's video image a glance as well. "And the rest of you?"

Banner pushed his glasses up his nose with a forefinger. "I don't think we have enough to go on."

"I agree," said Stark. "We need more

information."

Rogers drummed his fingers on the table. "I can't imagine their telling us anything that will make a difference. Still, I suppose we should keep an open mind."

Stark turned to Fury. "What do you think?"

The general sat back in his chair. "I think I need to have another talk with the Tomorrow Men."

5

As Jan stood at the transparent wall of the Triskelion's state-of-the-art gym, she remarked on how much she loved to watch her boyfriend work out.

For a big guy, he was so quick, so agile, so fluid. One would never know he's pushing eighty-five.

Certainly not as he swung bare-chested around the horizontal bar, all six-foot-two of him fully

extended, his expression relaxed, even serene. Then again, he was comfortable on the high bar. It was one of the things that hadn't changed much since 1945.

But even with Steve's display of athleticism to distract her, Jan couldn't help thinking about the Tomorrow Men, and the direction of the conversation after Fury left the conference room. For her part, she had continued to express the doubts she'd had all along. But Thor was more skeptical by half.

"With all due respect to Doctor Banner," he had said, "the fact that he has a couple of extra nipples is something any of us could have found out - if we were motivated to do so."

"Wouldn't there be medical records?" Steve had asked. "Something in Banner's scholastic file?"

The scientist had looked as if he were in pain, though Jan didn't think anyone else noticed.

"And military documents," Steve had continued. "Extra nipples, might even be cause for a deferment."

"No offense, Doctor," Stark had chimed in.

"None taken," Banner had responded, though that clearly wasn't the case.

Jan was just relieved the Tomorrow Men hadn't gone into the details of her life.

People were invariably surprised when they found out she was the Wasp. They seemed to expect someone tougher, someone who could play linebacker for the Jets if no one looked too closely.

Not a slim Asian woman who would rather wear a lab coat than track shoes, and whose experience in combat, until recently, had been limited to self-defense lessons at the Y.

Yes. They were surprised, all right.

But how much more surprised would they have been if they knew the truth - that she wasn't a human being at all, strictly speaking? That she was a mutant, a member of a species as different from homo sapiens as homo sapiens was from the Nean-derthal?

On the outside, she looked human enough. Thank God. But on the inside, she was all screwed up. She had organs normal people didn't have, proclivities that would have made her an outcast if everyone knew about them.

The Wasp ... it wasn't just a handle she had picked because her boyfriend could shrink her to insect size, or because she had invented a device that emitted a kind of sting. It was what she was, what she had always been, before Hank's shrinking process ever came close to being a reality.

When she went to bed at night she felt a powerful attraction to light, even if it was only the glow of a digital clock When she got up in the morning she found clutches of tiny eggs in the bedclothes.

Her need for sweets could be irresistible, often leaving her lightheaded with hunger. Unlike other people, she wasn't repelled by the thought of eating flies. And without realizing it, she would sometimes find herself chewing on pencils.

No, not just chewing. That would be almost normal. She would manipulate the wood in her

mouth, mix it with her saliva, and turn it into some kind of paper.

Like a wasp.

It had always scared her that she was so different. It had torn her up inside, keeping her from making friends lest they find out the truth about her.

Finally, after all those years of desperately pretending to be like other people, she hooked up with a group in which everyone was different. Thor, depending on whether one believed him or not, was either a madman or a Scandinavian god. Stark was a fanatic, in a social and economic stratum all by himself Steve was the larger-than-life product of a government super-soldier program. Banner could turn into a damned monster if he wasn't careful.

It should have been easy for Jan to lose herself in such a crew. To fit in. But she was still scared, because habits like hers could make even a god lose his lunch.

Contrary to what was apparently popular belief, Steve Rogers didn't like to exercise.

He never had, going all the way back to the days he had spent as a 128-pound weakling, before the super-soldier program got hold of him. And then, after he was transformed into Captain America, he didn't have to exercise.

All those changes in Rogers's musculature were products of the treatments they had given him. He hadn't earned any part of them in the gym. They had just happened.

But there were instances, however rare, when he did work out - times when he found comfort in mindless physical repetition. Like now, he thought as he executed loop after fully extended loop around the horizontal bar.

And it was because of the Tomorrow Men.

After all, Rogers had been thrust into the harsh glare of the twenty-first century with a lot of catching up to do. And he was doing it - he was making the adjustment. But every so often, he caught himself wishing he was still living in 1945.

Back then, people had gotten their news from the daily paper and their entertainment from the

radio. The phone company - and there was only one - had needed only seven digits to distinguish each of its customers numbers. And far from thinking about cloning or nuclear power or the Internet, people were marveling at the fact that stockings could be made of synthetic fibers.

It nettled him to think so many of his favorite things and people had been swept away in the rush of time. Like the blueberry pie at the Horn & Hardart automats. And the big band sound. And most of the guys alongside whom he had fought Hitler's blitzkrieg.

All ghosts. All irrevocably, irretrievably gone.

But even more unsettling to him were the things and people he had missed entirely. Hula-Hoops. The Honeymooners. Jackson Pollock. Drive-in movie theaters. Mickey Mantle. The Berlin Wall. Martin Luther King. The World Trade Center. Disco.

He wasn't sure he would have appreciated it all, but he wished he had been given the chance. It was - for him, at least - as if a big hunk of history had simply never happened.

And Jan wonders why I like to keep to myself so much. It wasn't because he couldn't cope with the wonders of the twenty-first century. It was because he was still coming to grips with all the decades that came before it.

Now the Tomorrow Men were giving him another era to contend with, another endpoint without anything connected to it. Despite his physiological superiority, despite the air of confidence people imputed to him, it was almost more than he could handle.

Executing one last loop around the bar, Rogers tucked his knees into his chest and carried out a quadruple somersault before he planted his feet on the floor - his heels together, his arms extended, his weight balanced within a hundredth of an ounce.

This I can do, he thought.

It was only then that he realized he had attracted a gallery of gawking SHIELD personnel - Jan among them. Smiling a little to acknowledge her, he went over to the towel he had laid on the floor beside the apparatus and wiped his face with it.

Not that he needed it. He had barely broken a sweat.

For just a moment, Rogers felt unreal. As if he weren't part of the twenty-first century or any other. As if he were a phantom made up of people's expectations, drifting through time.

And it scared him a little.

But he was Captain America, damn it. He would get through it.

As Fury approached the chamber where the Tomorrow Men had been sequestered, he was pleased to note the vigilance of the half-dozen SHIELD guards posted outside the door.

"Sir," said Nakamura, the man in charge of the detail.

"I'd like a word with our friends in there," said the general.

"Of course, sir," said Nakamura. "And the password?"

Fury was the one who issued the new ones every

morning. He always had to resist using "Sword-fish."

"Gabriel Jones," he said, citing his parents' favorite jazz musician, who had recently celebrated his eightieth birthday in a Westchester nursing home.

Nakamura nodded. "Thank you, sir."

Before the Ultimates' confrontation with the Chitauri a few weeks earlier, Fury wouldn't have believed such security measures necessary. After all, Nakamura was standing right there, looking at his superior face to face.

Nothing like having your headquarters invaded by shapeshifters to make you a little paranoid, the general thought.

"Would you like us to accompany you inside?" Nakamura asked.

Fury shook his head. "That won't be necessary."

"As you wish, sir," said Nakamura.

He turned and tapped a six-digit code into a

touch-sensitive screen imbedded in the wall. A moment later, the door to the Tomorrow Men's cell slid aside.

"Go ahead, sir," said Nakamura.

As Fury walked in, he saw the Tomorrow Men's eyes move in his direction. They searched his face.

"General," said Weyland, standing up to greet Fury. "Your discussion lasted quite some time."

"Not really," said Fury. "I just wanted to mull everything over before I came to see you."

"And?" said the Tomorrow Man.

"We need more proof."

Weyland frowned. "We believed we had given you proof."

"The personal details you mentioned - Thor's dog and such - would be difficult to dig up these days, but not impossible. If you're really from the future, you must know something about us even we don't know - at least, not yet."

Weyland appeared to weigh the suggestion. "A logical approach, I'll grant you - except anything we tell you will change the timeline in some way. It will encourage you to take a certain action or adopt a certain attitude, or else back off from certain actions or attitudes. And in doing so, you'll invite a temporal disaster." -

Fury saw the problem. You have a better idea?"

"I don't," said Weyland. "Which perturbs me, because we should have foreseen this possibility. Knowing what we knew of you, we just assumed that you would trust us."

"Which, frankly, doesn't help your case."

"I understand," said Weyland. "But what have you got to lose by going after Tiber?"

"That depends on how nefarious you are."

"You know the kinds of crimes Tiber has committed. I would think you'd jump at the chance to stop them."

"If I knew for sure we would be doing that. For all I know, we'd be walking into a trap."

"Why would we want to trap you?"

"You tell me," said Fury.

*"So you won't go out on a limb?" asked Weyland.
"Even if it means you would be saving your
world?"*

"Even then."

*"But isn't that your organization's reason for
being? So it can address threats to the security
of your nation and others?"*

*"It is," the general conceded. "But first we've got
to qualify our sources. In this case, we haven't
been*

able to do that."

*Weyland frowned. "I'll have to give this some
thought."*

*"Keep in mind," said Fury, "we're not looking for
something we can find in the Post."*

"A paper periodical," said the Tomorrow Man.

"The reference isn't lost on me."

"Good," said Fury.

The ball, as the saying went, was in Weyland's court.

"In my brain?" Rogers echoed.

"Yes," said Chadaputra.

They were all back in the conference room, the Ultimates on one side of the table and the Tomorrow Men on the other. And Rogers couldn't believe what he had just heard.

He cast a glance in Fury's direction. "It's a joke, right?"

"I don't blame you for being skeptical," said Chadaputra. "Were our positions reversed, I'm sure I would feel the same way."

"You see," said Weyland, "the scientists in the super-soldier program had never created anything - that is, anyone like you before. They didn't know what to expect. There were so many changes taking place in your body, especially at

the genetic level... there was no telling how they might affect your mind."

"You need look no further than Doctor Banner to appreciate the validity of their concern," said Haggerty

Banner frowned on their video screens, but he didn't say anything in response.

"You might have become prone to fits of anger," Weyland continued. "Or paranoia. Or bouts of resentment. Or all of the above."

"Or," said Kosar, "you might simply have decided you preferred national socialism to democracy."

Rogers felt a spurt of disgust. "Impossible."

"It didn't happen," said Kosar, "but it might have. And if you did align yourself with the Axis cause, you would have represented a more formidable threat to the Allies than Adolf Hitler."

"So the super-soldier scientists installed a failsafe," said Chadaputra, "a way to neutralize you if you went astray. They had to protect their country, after all. It was the prudent thing to

do."

"I don't buy it," Fury interjected. "When we found Cap floating in the Arctic, our best people scanned him six ways to Sunday. If there had been a device floating around in his brain, they would have identified it."

"It's not easily identified," said Weyland. "If it were, it would have been useless, considering the advanced level of technology the Germans had at their disposal."

Thanks to the Chitauri, Rogers added inwardly. He couldn't help wondering how much more quickly the Allies would have won the war if the Germans hadn't had extraterrestrials on their side.

"We can debate this until our century," said Mat-subayashi. He glanced at his colleagues. "Perhaps we should just show our hosts what we're talking about."

"How?" asked the general, saving Rogers the trouble.

"You have a state-of-the-art emergency medical

facility here on the premises," said Chadaputra. "In my era, I'm an expert in the field of medical technology as well as an accomplished surgeon. With a little work, I can upgrade your equipment - enable it to show us what we need to see."

"And if you find it?" asked Rogers.

"I can remove it," said Chadaputra, "if that's your wish. Or I can leave it where it is. But first, let us identify the device."

"What's involved in that?" asked Jan, her concern touchingly evident in her voice.

"The procedure is no more dangerous or invasive than magnetic resonance imaging," Haggerty assured her. "And it takes just a few moments."

Fury looked at Rogers. "'You're the only one here who can give them the okay, Cap."

The super-soldier scowled. "I should have my head examined for even considering it," he said. "But you've aroused my curiosity, so what the hell. Let's do it."

As Henry Pym sat by himself in the Triskelion's ridiculously comfortable north-wing lounge and watched Steve Rogers's surgery on a high-definition television screen, part of him wanted the patient to die on the operating table.

He was ashamed of the fact, but he couldn't deny it. He hated Rogers and everything about him. He hated the way Rogers had tracked him down and confronted him with his beating of Jan, and then given him a taste of his own medicine.

As if he were my damned father, Pym thought bitterly, taking his belt to me.

Then, to literally add insult to injury, Rogers had taken Pym's place as Jan's lover. It was written up daily in the tabloids, the talk of all the celebrity TV shows. And every time Pym saw it, he felt a knife twisting in his guts.

So Pym had good reason to hate Steve Rogers, good reason to want the red, white and blue son of a bitch dead. Not that it was going to happen.

Not that he wanted it to happen, really.

And yet, there was that part of him that did.

"Did you get it?" Nick Fury asked.

"See for yourself," said Chadaputra, indicating the microscope he had been using when Fury walked in.

The general crossed the laboratory, which he still thought of as Banner's, and took a look through the microscope's eyepiece. It showed him something that looked like a boomerang, except it was bone-white and couldn't be seen by the naked eye.

Smaller than a fingernail dipping, Fury thought. And yet it had the ability to kill a man.

Even a man like Steve Rogers.

"There aren't any others," he asked, "are there?"

Chadaputra shook his head. "We checked, just to be certain. I assure you, General, this was the only one."

Well, Fury thought, that's a relief. The idea of a failr safe mechanism in Captain America's brain was almost as disturbing to him as a mechanism in his own. Come to think of it, maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to scan me too ...

"When can I speak to him?" he asked the Tomorrow Man.

Chadaputra shrugged. "Any time you want. Captain Rogers was awake throughout the operation."

Tony Stark smiled at his swiftly recuperating teammate. "You look like you could jump out of bed and take on the entire Swedish bikini team."

Rogers watched a nurse check his pulse. "I've never heard of that team," he said without a hint of irony in his voice, "but taking it on sounds kind of... um, dull and unfulfilling."

"You'd better say that," Jan remarked from the opposite side of the bed, "or our friend the nurse here is going to be the only one holding your hand."

The nurse, a chunky blond woman, wrinkled her

nose at Stark. "I know you're the boss here," she said, "but it's a little unusual to bring alcoholic beverages into a patient's room."

"Just making certain I've got no germs," said Stark, sloshing his martini around in its glass. "They don't thrive in an alcohol-rich environment, you know."

"You're bad," said Jan.

"But if the smell of a martini offends you," Stark told the nurse, "I'll be happy to escort it out of the room." He winked at Rogers. "Anyway, it's time I took care of a few things. See you when they let you out"

Which would be in only a few hours, thanks to Chadaputra's skill with a laser beam and Rogers's uncanny healing abilities. Incredible, Stark reflected as he let himself out of the infirmary.

It was difficult to keep from imagining what else the Tomorrow Man might accomplish with his advanced surgical know-how. If he could remove a microscopic sliver from Rogers's brain, would it be any more difficult to take out a tumor - one considered inoperable by the doctors of the

twenty-first century?

An interesting question, Stark thought.

But it wasn't the feasibility of the procedure that would determine Chadaputra's willingness to go ahead with it. The important thing, from the perspective of the Tomorrow Men, would be the repercussions of Stark's death.

If the growth in his brain never killed him, how would the timeline be changed? Radically - or barely at all? Would the future take shape in a new and even more frightening way? Or, as in the case of Rogers's surgery, would Stark's leave nary a blip?

It was something he hadn't dared to think about since he received the verdict about his tumor. The possibility of living a normal life, free from the sword of Damocles hovering over his head... the prospect of marrying, having a family, growing old...

But the Tomorrow Men are aware of my problem, he thought. They must be. Hell, they know how many godforsaken nipples Banner has. They have to know about the growth that killed one of the

wealthiest men on planet Earth.

And they haven't offered to do anything about it.

Which suggested that they had analyzed his impact on the timeline, and concluded that saving his life would cause too much havoc. So the tumor stays, Stark told himself And you may as well forget about lying on that bed with your friend the nurse taking your pulse.

Because it isn't going to happen.

"Tony?" someone said.

Someone feminine. But the way he gadded about, that didn't narrow it down much. Turning, he saw it was Natasha.

"You're coming from seeing Rogers?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes."

"How is he?"

'Well enough to take on the Hulk again, if he had to. In fact, the Hulk's entire extended family.'

Natasha smiled at the quip. And she kept smiling long after the effect should have worn off.

"Something on your mind?" he asked.

"I just wanted to compliment you," she said. "So many men say they can place a liaison in perspective, and then find they're just fooling themselves. In reality, they're pining away."

"But not me," he said.

"Not you," she agreed. "Then again, you've had a lot more experience than most men. You have an advantage in that respect."

"Thanks," he said. I think.

"Seeing how you've handled the situation," she said, "it increases my respect for you as a man. And as a teammate."

He nodded. "I'm glad."

"Well," Natasha said, "see you," and continued past him into the infirmary.

Stark stood there a moment longer, thinking

about what had just happened. Then, shaking his head, he went to see Fury.

After all, the Tomorrow Men had given the Ultimates the proof they requested - and in doing so, put themselves in what had to be a whole new light.

Henry Pym was surprised when Fury summoned him to the conference room to serve as "another informed opinion." But no more surprised than the other Ultimates, if their expressions on seeing him were any indication.

Pulling out a chair, the scientist admired the renovation of the room since the last meeting he had attended there. Before I tortured my wife half to death, he thought bitterly. Before Rogers found me half-drunk and took out his frustrations on me.

As a member of the team, Jan was sitting there in the room, diagonally across the table from him. As far away as possible, he thought. Not that he blamed her.

She was the only one who wouldn't look at him. And for her sake, he did his best not to look at

her.

Fury scanned the faces around the table and asked, "Who's convinced?"

"I am," said Banner on his little video screen. "For godsakes, they knew something was in Rogers's head."

"You know," Thor said, "they could have gotten that sort of information in the here and now. Say, by tracking down one of the scientists who worked on the super-soldier project. Or his son. Or his former mistress."

"Unlikely," said Banner.

"Is it more likely," asked Jan, "that these guys are visitors from the far, hazy future?"

"What I mean," said Banner, "is that everyone even remotely associated with the super-soldier pro-gram has been accounted for. General Fury knows that better than anybody."

"The general also thought he knew about Rogers's brain," said Thor. "But as it turns out, he was wrong there too."

"So we're back to square one?" asked Banner.

Fury shrugged. "Maybe square one and a half. Personally, I have a hard time believing the future exists, if you know what I mean."

"You mean because it hasn't happened yet," said Stark.

Fury nodded. "So how can you be from it?"

"Sounds logical," said Stark, "if your vantage point is the present - that is, the early twenty-first century. But someone in the past might say we haven't happened yet. And to someone in the future, we're ancient history."

"That may be," said the general, "but this is the time I'm experiencing now, and this is the time I'm sworn to defend, so this is the time I'm damned well going to use as a reference point."

"Pretty parochial," said Banner, "if you ask me. Especially considering the time we call the present is becoming the past even as we speak."

"Don't give me that gobbledy-gook," said Fury. He glanced at Stark. "Either of you. As far as I'm

concerned, we might as well be talking about Oz, or Never Never Land, or - "

"Or Asgard?" Thor suggested.

"No offense," said the general, "but I find that pretty hard to accept too."

"But you're not asking us to go charging after some secret organization,' Jan told Thor. "So it really doesn't matter where you're from."

Thor chuckled in his beard. "Remind me not to ask you folks for help against the armies of Jotunheim."

"So what do we do now?" asked Banner. "Ask the Tomorrow Men for more proof?"

"We trust them," said Stark.

Everybody turned to him. "Despite our concerns?" asked Jan.

"Despite everything," said the billionaire. "At the risk of making a really bad pun, time is of the essence. Especially if Tiber is in the process of making its fortresses more difficult to penetrate,

as Weyland suggested. If we wait too long, we may regret it."

"According to the Tomorrow Men," said Thor.

"Who," Stark maintained, "have given us ample evidence that they're on the level."

"Circumstantial evidence," Jan reminded him.

"Which," said the billionaire, "is the only kind they have. They didn't make the trip here to win a court case, remember. They made it to save their world - and ours."

"Look at it this way," said Banner. "We haven't seen anything that conclusively proves they're telling the truth. But we also haven't seen a shred of evidence to the contrary. Not even a ... I don't know. What's smaller than a shred?"

"Never mind," said Fury. "We get the idea."

"Then you'll investigate their claims?" Stark asked.

Or do I have to do it on my own? The industrialist didn't say it, but it was implicit in

the way he asked the question.

To that point, Pym hadn't contributed a damned thing to the conversation. He had sat there like a dummy, listening to everyone else.

Waiting for his chance. And now it was here.

They had reached a critical juncture. There was a decision in the offing, and Pym had an opportunity to influence it one way or the other.

He wanted desperately to do so. But he couldn't think of anything to say that hadn't already been said.

Fury stroked his chin for a moment. Then he said, "All right. We'll go so far as to check them out."

As everyone rose from the table, the general cast a glance in Pym's direction. A glance of disappointment, it seemed.

Fury was probably regretting his decision to bring Pym to the meeting - which was about the worst result the scientist could have hoped for.

Stark watched Weyland's expression become one

of relief as he absorbed what Fury had to say to him.

"You won't regret this decision," said the Tomorrow Man.

"I hope you're right," the general told him.

Their voices echoed a little in the conference room, where it was just the three of them. But then, with the Ultimates' position set in stone, Fury hadn't seen the need to entertain another "mob scene," as he had put it.

"However, it won't be easy to obtain the information we need," Weyland advised them. "As I told you, our intelligence on Tiber is pretty spotty."

"Exactly what have you got?" Stark asked.

"Just a single lead, unfortunately. It concerns a high-ranking member of Tiber. In his public life, he was a security executive for a powerful industrial conglomerate headquartered in what you call the United States."

Stark was glad Rogers wasn't in the room. He

wouldn't have taken positively to the reminder that the nation he was named after wasn't going to survive forever.

"The guy's name?" asked Fury.

Weyland frowned. "We don't know it. Only his position and the entity for which he worked."

"And which entity was it?" asked Stark.

The Tomorrow Man told him.

Stark smiled. Then he took out his cell phone and advised Morgan, his pilot, to get the Stark International jet ready.

"Where to, sir?" asked Morgan.

"The south of France," said Stark.

"Hell of a time for a vacation," said Fury.

"It'll be a working vacation," Stark assured him.

Stark found Miles Joseph Mortimer on a sun-drenched balcony jutting from the red-clay hills of the French Riviera.

Mortimer was a heavyset fellow with a ruddy complexion and thinning red hair, who could have used a hat in all that bright sunshine but for some reason eschewed one. Against the startling blue of the heavens, he looked like a boiled lobster.

"Tony," he said. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"It certainly has," said Stark, moving to meet Mortimer and shake his hand.

Miles Mortimer was one of the richest men in the world, and one of the shrewdest as well - despite the country-boy facade he affected. But Stark was richer. And smarter.

Beyond the rail of the balcony, he could see a cascade of chalk-colored houses spilling down to the shrugging surface of the Mediterranean. But he couldn't see the town's black sand beach. It was hidden from him by the hills.

Twenty years earlier, before Stark filed his first microtechnology patent, he had spent the night in a beat-up sleeping bag on that beach. He remembered grumbling to himself about how hard the rocks were beneath him.

As he regarded Mortimer, those days seemed far away.

Mortimer clapped him on the shoulder. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"I thought you'd never ask. Martini, two olives."

"Good for you," said Mortimer. "I see another blue cocktail, I'm going to barf"

Using a walkie-talkie lying on a nearby table, Mortimer ordered his guest a drink. As they waited for it, he produced a cigar and asked, "Mind if I light up?"

Stark shrugged. "Not in the least."

In point of fact, he found tobacco smoke repugnant, but he had gotten good at disguising the fact. Even in the twenty-first century, it was

often necessary to make deals in smoke-filled rooms.

"So how the hell are you?" Mortimer asked, puffing on the cigar and throwing the match over the rail of the balcony.

"Never better," said Stark. "You?"

"I've got wicked high blood pressure, my cholesterols verging on two-eighty, and I'm popping six different kinds of medication." He coughed once, then took another puff "How the hell do you think I am? I'll be lucky to see sixty."

Stark would never see forty. Still, he maintained his careless appearance as a white-garbed servant brought his drink out on a silver tray. "I trust the oil business is treating you right?"

"Losing my shirt," said Mortimer as he watched Stark take custody of his drink. "Another day, another button. They don't build wells the way they used to."

"And the radio stations?"

"Worst idea I ever had. The damned things

hemorrhage money left and right. Want to buy them? They'd go nicely with those TV markets you picked up.

"Yes," said Stark, "I'm sure the FCC would appreciate that. Then I could buy a chain of newspapers and a cable system, and really make their day."

Mortimer chuckled bitterly. "Stiff-necked bastards. Why can't they leave us honest businessmen alone? Isn't it hard enough to make a buck these days?"

As it happened, Mortimer made a buck every three point one seconds. But, Stark thought, who am I to quibble? "Devilishly hard," he said sympathetically. "And by the way, while we're on the subject of corporate philanthropy.. ?"

Mortimer looked at him askance. "Is that the subject we were on?"

Stark smiled. "I imagine you've heard about my little venture into health care."

"I believe I have," said Mortimer. "Uptown Presbyterian, isn't it? Nice little pickup, from

what I understand."

"I've made worse deals," said Stark. "But to be honest, it wasn't an investment. Not in the financial sense of the word."

"You mean there's another sense?"

"That area needed a real hospital," said Stark, "with adequate staffing and state-of-the-art equipment. Now it's got one. But it could use a children's wing."

"You're breaking my heart," said Mortimer, blowing smoke rings into the air.

The man was famous for his refusal to give money to charity, and Stark knew it. What's more, Mortimer knew he knew it. But Stark persisted anyway, in a manner Mortimer could appreciate.

"Too bad about that campaign scandal," said Stark, wincing as if it had happened to him instead. "The media always blows those things out of proportion."

"Tell me about it," said Mortimer, warming to the subject. "Everybody and his mother slips money

to those Senate hoohahs- on the golf course, in the men's room, even in the church parking lot. How is it I'm the one who gets caught?"

Of course, there were heads of corporations who didn't make illegal campaign contributions, Stark among them. But he refrained from bringing that up.

"It's like I'm a leper all of a sudden," said Mortimer. "Took me years to convince old man Fujimoto to joint-venture a line of hybrid vehicles. Now he says he wants nothing to do with me. Says he's worked too hard to get a piece of the American market to take a guilt-by-association hit."

"The truth," said Stark, "is I wouldn't touch you either."

Mortimer made a sound of disgust.

"On the other hand," Stark added coyly, "there's a way to change the public's perception."

"Hey," said his host, "don't you think I'm paying my public relations people to do that? Lot of good they're doing me. You know what those

monkeys get an hour?"

Stark didn't answer. He just looked up and swept his hand slowly across the sky, as if he were reading words off a celestial billboard. "I can see it now. The Miles Joseph Mortimer Children's Wing of Uptown Presbyterian Hospital. Has a nice rhythm to it, don't you think? And it'll make people forget about your little indiscretion."

Mortimer's eyes narrowed above his cigar. Then he took the thine out of his mouth and laughed out loud. "Leave it to Tony Stark to make a philanthropist out of an old skinflint like me."

"It's a gift I have," said Stark.

"You think I can get my name done in neon? Might as well get my money's worth."

"Sure," said Stark, "why not?"

But Uptown Presbyterian wasn't the only reason he had made the trip. Far from it.

Stark walked out to the rail, looked out over the sea, and sipped his martini. "I understand you have a new head of security. Worked for

Papadopoulos at one time, if it's the fellow I'm thinking of"

"He's the one," Mortimer confirmed. "Miercoles. Why? You planning on trying to steal him away?"

Stark glanced at him. "First chance I get."

Mortimer laughed, coughed, and laughed some more. "You kill me, Stark, you know that?"

Stark shrugged. "Another gift."

"Anyway," said Mortimer, "you wouldn't like Miercoles. He's a little more heavy-handed than the guys you're used to. A little quicker to go for the jugular."

"Oh?" said Stark.

"Some of the businesses I'm in, you need that. But then, we've all got a few skeletons in our closet. Another martini?"

Stark polished off the remainder of the first one.

"Actually, I've got to run, It's been a pleasure, Miles."

"Hey," said Mortimer, "the pleasure was all mine."

Jan was uncomfortably self-conscious about the click of her heels as she crossed the expansive slate floor of the Triskelion's mess hall.

Actually, the place was anything but a "mess." The limited-edition watercolors gracing the walls, the cherry wood chairs and tables, and the bronze light fixtures descending from a majestic cathedral ceiling created an atmosphere more in line with a five-star restaurant than a military cafeteria.

She had never seen the place so empty. But then, the lunchtime crowd had come and gone, and the only diners were the Tomorrow Men. A half-dozen armed guards stood along the walls, trying to be watchful without being obtrusive.

As Jan approached Weyland and his comrades, they stopped eating and turned to her. She waved away the need for it.

"Nothing official," she told them. "I just wanted to speak with Mister Weyland for a moment." She turned to him. "In private, if you don't mind."

It wasn't that she was going to say anything the others didn't already know, if they were telling the truth about being from the future. She just felt awkward discussing her personal life in front of a group.

"No problem at all," said Weyland.

Wiping his mouth with his green cloth napkin, which matched the chair cushions, he got to his feet. Then he allowed Jan to escort him to the windows, where she wouldn't have to worry about the guards overhearing their conversation.

"Listen," she said, standing in front of an unobstructed view of the Statue of Liberty, "I'm still not one hundred percent certain you're from the future. But if you are, I..."

Jan found it hard to say, even in private. She didn't know this man, after all. And this was something she hadn't ever discussed with anyone except her husband.

Oh hell, she thought, just spit it out.

"If you are" she continued, "you must know about me. What I am. How I do the things I do."

"I know you're a mutant," Weyland said with shocking matter-of-factness, "if that's what you mean."

Damn it, Jan thought, they really are from the future. "Do you also know what people think of mutants these days?"

"They don't trust them," he said, "partly because they're different, partly because of the public actions of certain individuals."

Jan nodded. 'With that in mind, I'd appreciate it if you kept what you know about me to yourself.'

"There's no need to worry," Weyland told her.

"We're careful to avoid anything that might introduce unintended complications to the timeline. And if the public discovered you were a mutant, unintended complications would surely follow"

"Actually," said Jan, I'm not just talking about the public. I don't want any of my teammates to know either."

He considered the request. Then he said,

"Agreed. They won't find out from me or any of my colleagues."

But they may find out from someone else, Jan thought. Is that what you're telling me, Tomorrow Man?

She hoped not. It was tough enough being Captain America's girlfriend. Being Captain America's mutant girlfriend might be more than she could handle.

Then something else occurred to her - something bigger than her own small life. "There are mutants in your time, right?"

Weyland just looked at her.

"Sorry," she said, feeling stupid. "I forgot - the timeline."

"No," said the Tomorrow Man, his voice full of sympathy, "I'm the one who's sorry."

Jan wondered what he meant. Was he sorry that he couldn't comment, because of his concern for the timeline, or sorry about what would happen to mutantkind by the time his era rolled around?

She hoped she would never find out.

Thor leaned forward on his park bench and tossed a piece of bread to the pigeons amassed in front of him.

Eagerly, they converged on it, but only one pigeon managed to pick up the morsel in his beak. Then he hurried away with it while the others chased after him.

Thor grunted. Greedy little creatures. No different from the bastions of corporate America.

Each one gobbled up what he could when he could, and the hell with everyone else. As long as his ego was bloated with a diet of success, nothing else mattered.

Including the generations that came after such men, which would have to deal with their air pollution and water pollution, and their depletion of nonrenewable resources. But why worry about people who hadn't been born yet? Where was the fun in that?

Stark, surprisingly, was an exception to the rule. Thor wouldn't have thought so a couple of

months earlier, before Fury recruited him into the Ultimates. But the better he got to know the man behind Stark International, the more he came to respect him.

That was one of the reasons Thor stayed with the group, though it was enmeshed in America's chauvinistic military-industrial complex. He trusted Stark to pursue a nonpartisan agenda, its only objective the good of humanity.

And that was why Thor was sitting in Brooklyn Heights, a hammer's throw from the Triskelion, when he could have been drinking honey-beer with his Aesir brethren. Stark had asked him to stay, in case something came up regarding the so-called Tomorrow Men.

Reaching into his paper bag, he tore off another piece of the loaf inside it and flung it over the heads of the pigeons. As before, they scampered mindlessly in pursuit of it.

There were no pigeons in Asgard, the stronghold of the gods. Only seabirds, he thought, rising and diving in an eternal cycle. And they had too much respect for themselves to go running after crumbs.

Closing his eyes, he transported himself - but not by accessing the god-road. The only power he used was his ability to remember, to see at that moment what he yearned to see above all else.

Asgard...

The light that bathed her every morning, igniting the snow on the highest peaks. The wind that touched off showers of red and gold leaves, freeing tender buds to grow in their places. The irresistible music of harp and voice, heard wherever the bone-white streets converged into a square.

The dark clouds that gathered every night, always foreshadowing rain but never bursting. The silver lightnings that stung them, cackling like hags.

And the halls that pushed against the heavens... such splendor, such majesty. Even the thought of them took Thor's breath away. Sky-blue Himminbjorg, the loftiest of them, so Heimdall could watch for Asgard's enemies. Breidablikk, Baldur's palace, her walls yellow like the sun. Odin's beloved Glad-sheim, a fortress painted crimson for blood and black for night.

In their hearths roared mighty fires. In their orchards hung apples so crisp and pungent his mouth watered at the thought of them. On the slopes beside them ran frosty, white waterfalls, full of melting snow from the heights.

If Thor's friends saw her just once, they would love her as he did. He was certain of it.

Their eyes would sting trying to take in her beauty. Their throats would close with a longing they didn't know they had. Their hearts would soar like birds and die and soar again.

But they never gave themselves the chance.

It wasn't as if Thor hadn't offered to take them with him, either individually or en masse. It would be as simple a feat to transport his comrades to Odin's feast-hall as to dispatch them to a bus station in Jersey City.

But time and again, they had declined his invitations. After all, in their eyes he wasn't a god at all - he was a man, and one with a history of mental instability. What if in his madness he transported them to the airless reaches of sublunar space? Or the bottom of the ocean? Or

someplace so hellish men didn't even have a name for it?

They liked the idea of his fighting alongside them, for there was no disputing his effectiveness on the battlefield. Some of them even valued his company. But when it came to exploring the wonders of the Nine Worlds, they would - as Tony Stark had put it - "take a rain check."

It was a pity. They were passing up a chance to see what only gods had seen. However, he wouldn't try to change their minds. As Odin had pointed out more than once, mortals couldn't simply be given wisdom; they had had to seize it on their own.

Like children, he thought, tearing off another piece of bread for the pigeons. But then, compared to the Aesir, human beings were children. And though they liked playing at being gods, they had a lot to learn.

Happy Hogan stood outside the Triskelion's gym and watched the Tomorrow Men work out the kinks.

They hadn't complained once about being confined in their cells. But Weyland had requested that, if their confinement was going to continue for any length of time, they be allowed to exercise now and then.

Despite the obvious need to keep the intruders under wraps, the general didn't like holding people prisoner. Apparently, he had been a prisoner himself once. In the end, he okayed the idea.

And Hogan had come down to watch. And to ask a question, if it wasn't too big a hassle.

Funny, he thought. The Tomorrow Men looked so athletic, he had expected them to take to the gym's weight-training machines like ducks to water. But they hadn't. In fact, they looked awkward on them, as if they had never seen such equipment before.

In the future, Hogan thought, they probably don't have weight-training machines. Especially in the kind of future the Tomorrow Men had described.

Matsubayashi was the first of them to take a break. He sat down against the far wall of the

facility and rested the back of his hairless head on it, his eyes closed as if he were asleep.

Hogan didn't want to disturb the guy. But at the same time, he knew he might not get another chance to talk with him.

Fortunately, he had top clearance in the Iriskelion. So when he entered the gym and walked across it, none of the SHIELD officers standing by the walls did more than glance at him.

As he approached Matsubayashi, the Tomorrow Man opened his eyes. "Good morning," said Hogan. "I'm-"

"Harold Hogan," said Matsubayashi, "director of special projects for Anthony Stark."

Hogan looked at him. "You know me?"

"Of course," said the Tomorrow Man. 'You're an important figure in the history of Stark International. "

Hogan liked the sound of that. With all he did for the boss, it was nice to know he would

eventually get some recognition.

"Listen," he said, "I've got a question for you. And before you object, it's got absolutely nothing to do with the future. Just the here and now."

"What is it?" asked Matsubayashi.

"It's about Thor. I mean... he says he's a thunder god. Not just a guy women think is a god, or one who plays ball like a god, but a real, honest-to-goodness god."

The Tomorrow Man nodded. "I think I see. You want me to tell you if he's what he says he is."

"I sure as hell do," said Hogan.

"Have you asked Thor this question?"

"Not personally, but I know what he'd say. He's told everyone who'll listen that he's Odin's son, visiting Earth to return it to its ancient purity - or something like that."

Matsubayashi smiled. "'You present me with a dilemma, Mister Hogan."

"Howso?"

"What if someone asked me something about you? Say, about your degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology?"

Hogan felt a rush of blood to his face. He had never quite gotten that degree - had, in fact, fallen a couple of courses short because of a fistfight with a professor.

Never mind that the guy was a leech. Never mind that he had been all over Tilda Washington, a girl too timid and studious to say anything about it.

Hogan had told the bastard to lay off Tilda, and it had come to blows right there in the guy's office. And whom was the school going to believe - some wet-nosed undergrad or the chair of MIT's award-winning physics department?

So Hogan had gotten thrown out of school. And when he tried to finish up those courses somewhere else, it always came down to the reason he left MIT.

Changing tacks, he started applying for jobs, but that didn't go any better. Nobody wanted a kid

who had almost gotten his degree. By the time he got to Stark, whose company was a lot smaller and looser at the time, he had decided he was just going to lie.

It worked. Hogan got the job. And though it occurred to him sometimes that he should tell Tony Stark what he had done, it became harder and harder to admit it.

After all, the boss trusted him as he trusted no one else. How could Hogan tell him he had lied to him all those years ago?

*"That's different," he told the Tomorrow Man.
"That's personal."*

Matsubayashi shrugged. "Maybe Thor's truth is personal too."

Hogan allowed the possibility. "I guess I'll withdraw the question. Not that you would have told me anyway."

"Insofar as the answer might have affected the way you act toward Thor, and therefore had an impact on future events..." Matsubayashi's voice trailed off meaningfully.

"Yeah," said Hogan, "that's what I thought."

"So," said Fury, leaning forward in his chair to greet his guest, "what was your little tete-a-tete in the mess hall about?"

Sitting down on the other side of the general's desk, Jan shrugged. "I wanted to know something about the future. Something personal. Weyland told me he couldn't say."

"He didn't want to screw up the timeline."

"Not even for me. I'm insulted."

Fury was tempted to ask what Jan's personal question was about, but decided to leave it alone. From the beginning, she had been as loyal and levelheaded as anyone on the team. The way he saw it, she had some leeway coming to her.

"Listen," he said, "I've got an assignment for you." He told her what it was. "And before you object, I already know you're not the undercover type. But you can shrink to the size of an insect, and none of our undercover people can do that."

Jan frowned. "What I can't do is get around very

quickly. Flying for even the length of a city block can be a monumental effort when I'm that size."

"I know," said Fury "We've got someone else covering that leg of the race."

As far as Pietro Maximoff knew, he was the fastest man on the face of the Earth - which was what made the assignment at hand so very ironic.

If you were setting out to torture such a man, he thought as he sat drinking coffee by candlelight in front of the best hotel in Geneva, if you were doing your best to drive him over the edge... what better course could you pursue than to make him wait for hours on end?

In fact, that was what he was doing: waiting. Just as he had waited the day before, from morning until late at night, and the day before that as well. And for what?

To keep an eye on Antonio Miercoles. So when the security chief made contact with his comrades in Tiber, Pietro would be there to witness it - and if he were fortunate, put the Ultimates a little closer to finding a Tiber base.

Once Tony Stark identified Miercoles as the Tiberite cited by the Tomorrow Men, it became possible for Fury's people to monitor the fellow's travel plans. And though Miercoles traveled a great deal in his legitimate line of work, this particular trip had the earmarks of something else.

After all, Miles Mortimer's companies, widespread as they were, didn't do any business in Geneva.

With Pietro's inhuman speed, he was uniquely suited to both staying out of sight and staying close, so it became his job to keep track of Miercoles. And at the outset, the assignment had sounded simple enough. But what if Miercoles didn't contact his cronies for a week? Or an entire month?

Then I will go irretrievably insane, he thought. And Wanda will be left with a vegetable for a companion.

Not that it would be the first time, he thought with a smile. Back when he and his sister were small, she had taken a sweet potato from the cupboard and dressed it up as if it were a doll.

But is a sweet potato a vegetable? the mutant asked himself. I can never remember.

What he did remember, and all too well, was the way Wanda's eyes shone with tears when a dog got hold of her doll and tore it to bits. And he remembered as well the heat in her cheeks when he attempted to console her, and the mewling noise she made as she tried to stifle her little-girl sobs.

As distasteful as his mission was to him, it was made even more so by the absence of his sister. Ever since the two of them were little, they had relied on each other for emotional support, to a degree most people didn't understand.

The hell with them, Pietro thought.

People were just jealous. They envied him and Wanda their closeness - though if he had lacked a soulmate in life, someone with whom to share his joys and sorrows, he might have been jealous too.

And where are you now? he asked his sister silently. In some cold, dismal corner of the Triskelwn, watching the rain sluice down a

windowpane? Or walking the streets of Soho through clouds of sewer steam, wishing you had someone to show an especially delicate objet d'art in the window of an old antique shop?

He was still pondering the question when the revolving door of the hotel across the square began to spin. A moment later, black-bearded Miercoles emerged from it, a black raincoat draped over his shoulders, his eyes alert beneath thick, dark brows.

He looked about the square, paying no particular attention to Pietro. Then he shrugged on his coat, ran his fingers through his brush of dark hair, and proceeded down the street to his left.

Pietro waited until Miercoles was out of sight before he laid some coins down for the waitress and offered pursuit - not so quickly that anyone would suspect him of being homo superior, yet quickly enough to close the gap before Miercoles got too far.

But when the mutant turned the corner onto another cobble-stoned square, he found it was empty - except for some ornate black streetlights, each with a nimbus of fog around its

lamp. Miercoles was nowhere in sight.

Pietro felt the heat of frustration rise in his cheeks. It can't be, he thought. I just saw him. Swearing softly, he began combing the narrow streets that fed off the square.

Had anyone been present to witness his search, all they would have seen was a black streak - black being the color of both his slacks and his jacket. Such a witness would have been startled, but would never have suspected that the streak was even vaguely manlike.

Miercoles might have given some other operative the slip. However, at Pietro's accelerated rate of speed, he would be able to find the Tiberite eventually. He was certain of it.

Until the minutes passed, one after the other, and he failed to catch even a glimpse of the bearded man. Gradually, Pietro reached the inescapable conclusion that Miercoles had eluded him.

More than likely, he thought, he entered a building as soon as I lost sight of him - either because that was his destination or because he

realized he was under surveillance.

Either way, Miercoles was gone. And along with him, the possibility of finding Tiber.

Fury won't be happy, he thought.

Then, as if there were a God and he was inclined to answer the unspoken prayers of doubting mutants, Pietro caught a glimpse of someone who might have been Miercoles.

He was far away, emerging from a doorway that opened on a hilly, poorly lit street. But his hair and garb were dark enough to match the security chief's description.

Yes, thought Pietro, it's him. He was sure of it.

Determined not to lose the bastard a second time, he pelted down the street as fast as he could. However, he was careful to keep to the shadows so his speed would go unnoticed.

Finally, the street ended and he came to a bridge that crossed the Rhone. It was then that he realized Miercoles had given him the slip again.

Where in hell did he go now? Pietro demanded of himself

"Turn around," someone behind him said in a deep, distinctly Spanish-accented voice. "But do it slowly, or it's the last thing you'll ever do."

Pietro turned and saw that the threat had come from Miercoles. The short, ugly gun in the Tiberite's hand was pointed directly at the mutant's face.

Miercoles grinned triumphantly in his beard. "You thought I didn't see you?"

Pietro didn't move. He couldn't, lest he give away the secret of his superhuman speed.

"Well," said Miercoles, "you were wrong. Now tell me who you are and what you're up to."

Pietro just stood there.

"You're working for that damned Hesselbach," said the bearded man. "Isn't that right?"

Still Pietro remained silent.

Miercoles tilted his head to the side, as if to get a better look at his adversary. "It takes courage to remain silent when someone's got a gun pointed at you. Unfortunately, courage won't keep you alive. Now I'll ask you one last time - are you working for Hesselbach?"

The mutant didn't respond.

Miercoles made a sound of deep-seated disgust. Then he pulled the trigger of his gun.

What happened next was tricky, even for someone as fast as Pietro. It wasn't just a matter of dodging a bullet at close range, which was difficult enough. He also had to make it close enough for Miercoles to think he was dead.

As it happened, the mutant miscalculated ever so slightly. But it was enough for the bullet to scrape the front of his jacket as he tossed his head back and plunged over the iron railing.

Crap, he thought.

Pietro had purchased the jacket only a few days earlier, and had looked forward to showing it to his sister. Now it would be ruined - not only by

the bullet, but by the bath he was about to take.

A moment later, he hit the rushing water of the Rhone with a splash, and allowed himself to be carried by the current. But not for long, he assured himself

Perhaps a hundred feet downriver, he broke the surface. By then, Miercoles had put his gun away and was walking briskly from the scene of the apparent crime.

Too quick for the security chief to see, Pietro grabbed hold of the railing and pulled himself up over it. Then he darted into a pool of shadow and waited for Miercoles to turn the corner.

Having learned his lesson, Pietro wouldn't wait long before pursuing his "killer." He would follow in a few seconds, using his speed to remain a blur.

One thing, at least, would be in his favor: Miercoles wouldn't feel the need to be quite as vigilant now that he believed his pursuer had been neutralized.

Pietro just hoped his cell phone hadn't gotten

ruined in the river. Because when the security chief led him to his destination, he needed to be able to make a call.

8

PIETRO HAD BEEN STANDING ON THE DARKENED rooftop for nearly half an hour before he heard a tiny, high-pitched noise in his ear - one that wouldn't have sounded like a voice at all except for the fact that he was expecting it.

"It's about time," he whispered.

"Screw you too," came the response. "You think everybody moves as fast as you do?"

Pietro made a derisive sound. "Believe me, that is one illusion under which I have never labored."

He pointed past the edge of the roof to a truck, which was parked in front of the warehouse across the street. There were two men sitting in the front of it, and its engine was idling.

"Miercoles?" she asked.

"Gone, Pietro told her. "But they didn't start loading the truck until he had been in the warehouse for a couple of hours. I don't know what they're waiting for, but my guess is they'll leave as soon as they get it."

"Gotcha," said the tiny voice.

"By the way," he said, "how is my sister?"

"She's well," said Jan. "Call her. She said something about a restaurant in Riverdale the two of you like."

Pietro smiled to himself, remembering the last time he and Wanda had visited the place. How we scandalized the waiter!

"Yes," he said, "I know the establishment."

But there would be time for reminiscences later. For now, he had a truck to keep an eye on.

As if on cue, two other men came out of the warehouse with a lone: crate in their hands. It looked heavy.

"That could be it," he said.

In fact, it was. The men carrying the crate loaded it onto the truck, pulled its metal gate down, and locked it into place. Then one of them rapped twice on the gate.

"You had best get going," Pietro told his colleague.

But Jan was gone already. Or at least, he didn't hear her say anything in return.

"Good luck," he breathed as the truck pulled away from the curb and went rumbling down the street.

Tony Stark entered the Triskelion's virtual-reality room even though the red light was on in the corridor outside, signifying that the facility was in use. .

He found Natasha sitting in one of three semi-enclosed training modules, her black-garbed figure tinted red in the lurid illumination from the emergency lighting strips. Though most of her body was still, her hands were moving at a frenetic pace, each of her sensor-equipped

forefingers pulling an imaginary trigger several times a second.

Stark had no way of knowing how she was doing. That information was only available through the black plastic visor she was wearing, which tracked her progress through a sea of randomly generated adversaries via a bright green graphic in its upper right corner.

Like a videogame, he thought, except it had grim implications. After all, Natasha had to stay sharp for those times when she encountered the real thing.

Leaning close to her, Stark ever so gently pulled away one of the black plastic muffs covering her ears. Then he said, "I'm disappointed in you."

Natasha stopped firing and removed her visor. Then she looked up at him and said, 'Welcome back. And why is it, exactly, that you're disappointed in me?'

"This playing-hard-to-get approach you've adopted. I've decided it lacks the ring of authenticity."

She swiveled in her chair and smiled at him. "I'm not playing hard to get at all. I simply don't want to pursue any long-term relationships, with you or anyone else."

"Of course not," Stark said patronizingly.

"And," Natasha continued, "it's a bit conceited of you to think I'd make an exception for you. No, scratch that - more than a bit."

"It might be," he agreed reasonably enough, "if you really weren't after me. But you are."

"Listen," she said, "I've been trained to manipulate people's feelings - men's, in particular. I've been taught how to set a trap for them and lure them in. If I were after you, as you put it, don't you think I'd have gotten you by now?"

Stark shrugged. "The best traps often take the longest."

Natasha rolled her eyes. "There is none so blind as he who will not see."

"I've got an optical tracking system that can pick

out an undersized jackrabbit from a height of thirty-five thousand feet. I can see just fine, thanks."

"Maybe you need to work on an olfactory enhancement," she said, "so you can wake up and smell the coffee."

It was a good comeback. He had to give her credit for that. "My olfactory equipment works quite well," he told her, "and what I'm smelling isn't coffee."

Natasha chuckled. "Clever, but wholly inaccurate. I am not, in any sense, after you."

Stark chuckled. "Right." He indicated the visor. "Good hunting, by the way."

Then he left the room, feeling better than he had in days.

Hank Pym was grateful Fury had given him the chance to say goodbye to the only people in the Triskelion who really mattered to him.

"Well," he said to the Tomorrow Men, as a couple of SHIELD guards looked on, "it's been nice meet-

ingyou."

Weyland looked at him. "Are we going somewhere?"

"Actually," said Pym, "I am. I was only called in on a temporary basis, to take a look at your blood and so on.

"I see," said Weyland.

But he couldn't have foreseen it. Pym had only been called on because of the Tomorrow Men, so his return to the Triskelion wouldn't have been part of any recorded history.

"I imagine people have been asking you questions," he said. "About their futures, I mean."

"Some have," Weyland conceded.

"I have to admit," said Hank, "there are things I'd like to know as well. Like who's going to win the Kentucky Derby."

That got a smile out of the Tomorrow Men.

"I could be a rich man if I knew that," said Pym. He chuckled to himself. "But I'd be taking advantage. You've got to be careful about how you affect the timeline."

"That's true," said Weyland.

"If I could ask one question," the scientist continued carefully, "it wouldn't be about getting rich. It wouldn't be about me at all. It would be about Jan."

"Your wife," said the Tomorrow Man.

"That's right," said Pym.

Weyland didn't say anything in response. However, he could hardly have missed the whisper of pain in the scientist's voice.

"I wouldn't try to change anything," Pym noted. "I doubt I could do anything about it anyway. I would just want to know if she's going to go on hating me forever."

"I wish I could tell you," said Weyland. "But the timeline - "

"Is sacred. I know. I just thought - " Pym stopped himself, gathering what was left of his dignity. "Anyway, that would be the question I'd ask. If I had the chance."

Weyland nodded. "I understand." But he didn't provide any answers.

"Well," said Pym, "nice talking with you."

"The same," said the Tomorrow Man.

"Damn," said Fury, peering over Hogan's shoulder at the monitor and its vicious-looking swirl of blood-red graphics.

"Just what I was thinking," said Hogan.

"How far away is it?" Stark asked, his voice taut with concern.

Hogan, who was seated at a keyboard, tapped in a command. A moment later, Fury could see an irregular green outline. The crimson swirls, magnified now, were encroaching on the edge of it.

"Not far enough," Stark concluded.

"Why did they wait so long to contact us?" the general asked.

"The storm wasn't supposed be that strong," Hogan said, "or that fast, and it wasn't supposed to move in that direction. Then, suddenly, it was on top of them."

Fury shook his head. "It's thousands of miles from here. We'll never get there in - "

Suddenly something occurred to him. Judging from the look in Stark's eyes, the idea had dawned on him as well.

"Thor," said the billionaire.

"Damned right," said Fury. He leaned over, punched the stud that gave him access to the intercom system, and barked: "Thor!"

"I'm here," came the response. "In the southeast lounge. Is there something I..." But he never got any further, because Fury's declaration cut his question in half.

"Back in Arizona," said the general, "when we were fighting the Chitauri, you transported their doomsday bomb to another plane of existence."

"Nastrond," said Thor. "It's a desert, though - "

"Tell me later," said Fury, interrupting again.

"What I need to know now is... can you transport people as well? Say, to some other part of the world?"

"Of course. I just need to know where they're going."

"As in point it out on a map?" asked the general. "Show you a picture? What do you need to pull this off?"

"What's the problem?" Thor asked.

"Apparently," said Fury, "there's a hurricane bearing down on an island off the coast of Venezuela. It's called Calibana - population four hundred and sixty, including children. And if we don't hurry, there'll be nothing left of them."

"A globe would be best," said Thor, now that the general had explained his sense of urgency, "but

a map will do. If you've got the team in mind, get it together."

"I do," said Fury, moving toward the door, "and I will. As for a map, there's a big one on the screen in the ops center."

"Perfect," said Thor. "I'll meet you there."

Fury turned to Hogan. "I'll need Rogers. And Romanov. And Barton." He would have added Wanda and Pietro to the list, except they had to remain out of the public eye.

As for Stark, he was already on his way out of the room, headed for the chamber where he kept his "work clothes."

Thor had no sooner set foot in the central market plaza of Calibana than he felt the lash of wind-driven rain on his face.

In the sky, ponderous, smoke-gray clouds raced like a herd of wild, shaggy horses. Lightning scrawled a blinding white rune on the world. Thunder bawled like a hunger-crazed bear.

Thor was the god of the storm, the son of Odin

All-Father. He lived for this weather. But as he looked around at his comrades, he doubted they would have said the same.

Stark looked as stolid as ever in his high-tech armor, but Romanov and Barton couldn't help cringing in the face of such elemental fury. Even Rogers, whom science had annointed with powers rivaling those of Thor's brethren, felt compelled to take shelter beneath his shield.

Their mission was a far less complicated one than Fury had initially imagined. The island's last call for help, once SHIELD tracked it down, said that its entire population of nearly five hundred people would take shelter in the sturdiest edifices available to them - the handful of small hotels built by a wealthy speculator to accommodate a tourist trade that had never materialized.

Thor could see people cowering in the nearest of the hotels, the Spindrifter, their faces pressed against the glass doors of its lobby. "Start with them," he told Barton.

"Gotcha," said the archer, lowering his head and taking off across the plaza.

Thor dispatched Rogers and Romanov to the left of the Spindrifter, where they would find two other hotels nestled along the beach. At the same time, Stark took off in the direction of the Tradewinds, a fancier place built on a bluff a mile in the opposite direction.

The plan was to bring the inhabitants back to the plaza, one group after another. Then the son of Odin would whisk them to a refugee camp Fury was setting up in central Florida.

It would have been better if Thor could snap his fingers and transport every living soul off Calibana, regardless of how many of them there were and where they had chosen to hide. But even he couldn't do that

He was, after all, a god and not a magician.

9

As Stark caught sight of the Tradewinds, a pink, horseshoe-shaped complex set atop a

picturesque green bluff, he hoped there wasn't anyone inside it.

Unlike the other hotels on the island, this one wasn't recessed into the jungle. It stood exposed and unprotected, which allowed it, in better weather, to offer a spectacular and unobstructed view of the Calibanan sunrise.

But now, that unmitigated exposure left it open to the full wrath of the storm. Froth-laced waves from the dark, churned-up ocean came crashing against the Tradewinds' stucco walls unimpeded. And according to the latest weather reports, the situation was going to get worse before it got better.

Which was why Stark hoped to heaven the place was empty. If there were people inside, it would take a while for him to carry them to the market plaza. And at this rate, the hotel wasn't likely to last a whole lot longer.

Slicing through the elements, he approached the Tradewinds' colorful mosaic patio. It had lost not only all its furniture but the doors that led into the building as well, leaving the restaurant within open to the storm.

Without slowing down, Stark plunged through the open doorway into a gaily decorated dining room, which he crossed in a fraction of a second. Then he negotiated a couple of turns and came out in the hotel's pastel-colored, seashell-shaped lobby.

So far he hadn't spotted a soul. However, he hadn't gotten a look at the guest rooms yet. And until he did, he couldn't cross the place off his list.

Stark had stayed in too many hotels not to have a sense of how they were designed. There were elevators with stairwells beside them on either side of the lobby. Picking one of the stairwells, he spiraled up its shaft until he reached the second floor.

The corridor there boasted about a dozen doors. One by one, he battered them down with carefully controlled blasts of electromagnetic energy. And in each case, the room beyond appeared empty.

On the third floor, the story was the same. Twelve rooms, no one inside any of them. That led Stark to the fourth floor, and the fifth, with the same results.

However, there was still the other side of the hotel, accessible from the alternate stairwell. Using minimum thrust in his descent, he returned to the ground floor and crossed the lobby

Seen through a rounded glass wall, the storm was building rapidly in intensity, bending a decorative grouping of towering palm trees until they were almost parallel to the ground. Before long, they would tear loose of their moorings and go crashing into the jungle.

Hurry, Stark told himself.

This time, when he reached the second floor, he saw the first door on his left was ajar. Pushing it open the rest of the way, he looked beyond it into the guest room.

It looked empty, like all the others. Inhabited recently, judging by the way the bedcovers had been pulled and crumpled, but apparently inhabited no longer.

He was about to go on to the next room when he heard something - a whimper, as if from an animal. Or a child, he thought. And it had come from the vicinity of the room's only closet.

Walking over to it, he opened it - and exposed a quartet of youngsters, none more than ten years old.

They were cowering in the corner of the closet, wide-eyed with apprehension.

"Don't worry," Stark said as reassuringly as he could. "Help has arrived."

But they didn't greet him the way he had expected. They began screaming, as if he were a bigger threat to them than the storm ravaging their island.

Stark held up his metal-gloved hands. "It's all right," he told the kids. "Really."

Thanks to the armor's state-of-the-art audio tech, he sounded as if he were speaking in a natural voice. But it didn't seem to calm the children one iota.

I must look pretty frightening, he realized.

In designing his armor, he hadn't given any thought to how it would appear to children. If he had had an audience in mind, it had been the

army of secretaries he saw when he wove his way among the spires of Manhattan.

Unfortunately, he couldn't please everyone. But it won't hurt to get a few focus groups going, especially with kids in mind. Maybe there's some tweak I can make...

Suddenly, the thought was interrupted by a crash. A window, thought Stark. Something went through it - maybe part of a tree. At least he hoped that's what it was.

"Come on," he pleaded with the kids, "come out of there and I'll take you somewhere safe."

They didn't budge. But then, their parents had no doubt warned them about talking to strangers, and there wasn't anybody quite as strange as a man in a metal suit.

So Stark wasn't going to talk the kids into cooperating. That left him only one other option.

Reaching into the closet, he scooped up two of the children in his metal arms and walked out of the room with them kicking and pounding at him. Once out in the hall, he blew out a window with

an energy pulse, then flew through the opening.

Instantly, he was buffeted by a fierce, sideways blast of wind. But he didn't let it stop him. Holding the kids to him as tightly as he could without hurting them, he headed for the rendezvous point.

Thor watched the red, gray, and yellow figure of Iron Man vanish into the embrace of the storm as Stark returned to the hotel room where he had discovered the children.

The thunder god looked down at the two of them, huddled against him in the hissing, spitting rain. Scared and miserable, he thought. But not for long.

Thor hadn't counted the people he sent from storm-wracked Calibana to Fury's refugee camp in Florida. He just knew there had been a lot of them. A hundred, perhaps, if he had to guess.

But there were a great many more somewhere on the island. And time wasn't being kind to them.

The clouds around the island were galloping faster than ever, the winds keening more loudly,

the lightning flashing more brightly. By the time the storm was done with the place, there wouldn't be much left of it.

Just then, another bunch of Calibanans came bustling across the plaza, clutching their offspring and the few small belongings they could carry. They looked at Thor with trepidation, knowing from the instructions of whoever had roused them - Romanov or Barton - that the bearded man was to be their savior.

But they couldn't know in what manner. After all, he didn't have a boat for them, or a plane, and even if he had possessed such a thing, it would have been unwise to trust it in such weather.

Beckoning, Thor got the natives to gather around him, joining the children Stark had delivered to him. Then he raised his hammer to the heavens and brought down a shrieking bolt of lightning.

But it wasn't the kind that would reduce a man to a shriveled husk, though whoever saw it from a distance might think so. It was the kind that only a thunder god could summon, the kind that would open a god-road to a different place.

One that wasn't so far away, by Thor's standards. Not nearly as far as Vanaheim or Niflheim, or one of the other worlds.

Looking around him, he saw that the Calibanans were gone. And since their transit would have been instantaneous, they would be wondering how they had come to appear in another place.

Though I would be surprised, he reflected, if they were inclined to complain about it. Especially after they realized some of their friends had preceded them there.

In the meantime, another group had appeared at the edge of the plaza - a small one this time. Only five, Thor decided, as he peered at them through the rain cascading into his eyes.

Then he realized they weren't Calibanans. They were wearing uniforms - a white and green variety he had seen not too long ago, back at the Triskelion.

On the Tomorrow Men.

Thor told himself that his eyes were playing tricks on him. But the longer he stared at the

approaching figures, the more certain he was that they were the intruders.

What in Odin's name are you doing here?" he demanded, the wind snatching his words as soon as he barked them.

"We've come to help," Weyland yelled back over the roaring voice of the storm, rain streaming across his face and into his eyes. "Just as you have."

If Thor had trusted them more, he might not have thought twice about accepting their presence there. As it was, he felt compelled to keep an eye on them.

After all, the Ultimates were vulnerable in the midst of such chaos and confusion. And if anything unfortunate happened to one of them, it would be easy to blame it on the storm.

"What can we do?" asked Weyland.

Thor was tempted to tell him to return to the Triskelion, and his companions along with him. However, he didn't think any of them would listen. And truth be told, he admitted silently, we

can use the assistance.

Thor pointed his hammer at one of the hotels they hadn't checked yet, which lay further down the shoreline. "It's called the Beachcomber. Check each room. There's no telling who may be hiding inside them."

The Tomorrow Men didn't say anything in response. They just took off in the direction Thor had indicated, looking eager to follow his instructions.

The son of Odin hoped that's all they would do.

This time, Stark didn't bother entering the front door of the Tradewinds. He flew through the window he had destroyed and swerved into the room.

The kids were in the closet, right where he had left him. Thank God. But the fact he had taken their friends away certainly wasn't making them any happier to see him.

When this is over, he thought, I'll take them out for ice cream. As much as they can eat. Flavors they've never heard of.

And he would leave the armor at home.

But first Stark had to get them out of there. Grabbing them up as he had grabbed the other kids, he headed for the door. The kids were kicking him, trying to wriggle free, but the armor kept Stark from feeling anything.

Using the shattered window for an exit again, he emerged into a cauldron of wind. It was even worse than before, hammering at him, trying to push him off his course.

With the help of his thrusters, Stark resisted it. The Tradewinds fell away beneath him as he rose above the level of the treetops, looking for a glimpse of the plaza where Thor was waiting for him.

Then he saw it - the open square, surrounded by a jumble of white buildings. He couldn't see Thor yet through the slashing rain, but he expected to rectify that deficit in the next minute or so.

Until a more powerful blast than all the others drove him sideways, forcing him off course as if he were caught in the grip of a giant hand. He swung his feet to the left to right himself, but

the wind was too strong. It flipped him over and sent him careening in the direction of the treetops.

Just in time, Stark pulled out of his dive and shot upward again. But he was caught in another monstrous gust, as unrelenting as the first. And as he fought to maintain his heading, his body twisting to keep his heels pointed in the right direction, he felt one of the kids slip out of his grasp.

Before he knew it, the kid was flying away from him, as if he had a propulsion system of his own. Flying so fast through the sheeting rain that he would be out of sight in a matter of moments.

No! Stark thought, horrified as he had never been horrified by anything in his life.

Maintaining his hold on the other child, he boosted his propulsion setting a full notch and shot forward. But one heel-thruster seemed to hit a touch harder than the other one, causing him to veer to his right - and suddenly, though he had lost sight of his objective for less than a second, the boy was nowhere in sight.

Stark's stomach muscles clenched in panic. He's going to die, he thought. He's going to die because of me.

Then he got hold of himself, forced himself to think. He had a few seconds, probably, before the kid was killed in one of several ways, all of them too grisly to contemplate.

Speeding up some more wouldn't help him accomplish anything. And it might kill the kid who was still tucked under his arm.

Then it came to him.

Touching a stud just behind his mask, he activated his armor's infrared-vision function. Instantly, he was looking at an entirely different tableau, marked not by reflected light but by the amount of heat everything gave off.

And the boy was giving off more heat in that howling mess than anything else.

He showed up in the mask's eye slits as a vaguely human-shaped red blotch, spinning like a trapeze artist at the height of his signature stunt. Making a beeline for the kid, Stark saw the blotch

getting steadily bigger.

But there was something behind it, something that gave off a very faint heat signature of its own. Something big enough to be a hotel, he thought grimly.

He didn't know which one, but it didn't matter. If he didn't move quickly, it would be a deathtrap.

Knowing his timing had to be perfect, Stark maintained his speed until he caught up to the kid. Reaching out, he clamped his fingers around the boy's ankle. Then he shot straight up, the front of his plastron grazing the stucco surface, until he could arch his back and loop away from it.

Gotcha! he thought.

Even more firmly than before, he held the kid to him. Held both kids. And this time he got closer to the ground, even if it meant weaving through the jungle.

It took longer that way, and Stark wasn't always sure he was going in the right direction. At one point, he was certain he had doubled back toward

the Tradewinds.

Then a line of white buildings loomed through the slanting rain. Relieved, he entered their welcoming embrace - and a moment later, reached the plaza where Thor was waiting, half-drowned but still standing his ground.

Natasha had combed through the last section of the shuddering, glass-littered Beach Tree hotel, and was heading for the next storm-wracked building along the coast, when she caught sight of someone who didn't look the least bit like a native.

The person was running along the beach, just beyond the edge of the jungle. It was a woman, though her head was shaven. And she was wearing the green and white garb of the Tomorrow Men.

Haggerty? Natasha asked herself.

It didn't seem possible. However, the Tomorrow Men had already accomplished the impossible, if their story could be believed. And escaping the Triskelion couldn't have been any more difficult than sneaking into it.

So the question wasn't whether it could be Haggerty springing along the beach. It was what she was doing there.

Natasha's first priority was the evacuation. That wasn't going to change. But she was also going to see if she couldn't figure out what the Tomorrow Woman was doing on Calibana.

Stark was taking off again into the teeth of the hurricane, headed for the last of the shoreline hotels, when he heard his name called over his comm system.

It was Natasha's voice, and it was full of urgency.

"What is it?" he asked, hoping she could hear him better than he could hear himself.

"I'm at the Terraces," she snapped, "landward side! I need your help!"

Stark changed direction, slicing through sheets of pounding rain as if they weren't there. It took him twenty-five seconds to reach the Terraces, and another two to find Natasha.

She was kneeling amid a field of debris - the remains of a wall that had been ripped off the hotel's steel skeleton, exposing a honeycomb of guest rooms. There was someone lying beside her, half covered with chunks of heavy masonry.

One of the Tomorrow Men, Stark thought, his heart pounding.

Landing next to Natasha, he lifted the wall fragments and hurled them away. But the damage had been done. The figure in white and green lay there pale and unmoving. And with the debris gone, Stark could see who it was.

Haggerty. Her features were slack and there was blood trickling from the corner of her mouth.

What's she doing here? Stark wondered.

Then he remembered Thor trying to tell him something as he dropped off the second pair of kids.

But the storm had been too loud for him to make out the words.

They must have been a warning: Haggerty's here.

And maybe the other Tomorrow Men as well.

Natasha tried to give the woman mouth-to-mouth, probably not for the first time, but it didn't take a doctor to see it was too late. Haggerty was gone, her ribs cracked, her insides pulped by the impact of the falling wall.

Stark cursed to himself Then, as gently as he could, he tried to pull Natasha off Haggerty's lifeless body.

"We've got to go," he said.

Natasha pushed his gauntleted hand away and kept at her resuscitation attempt. But after another few seconds, Stark tugged at her again. And this time, she relented.

"Crap," she breathed over her still-active comm link.

Crap is right, he thought.

Stark didn't know how Haggerty had escaped her confinement in the Triskelion, or how she had traversed thousands of miles to get to Calibana. But her objective seemed obvious enough: to

help with the evacuation.

She could have remained in a safe place and let the Ultimates carry out their rescue operation. It wasn't her job or that of her comrades to get involved. But she had gone out of her way to lend a hand, in the process putting her life on the line.

And she had paid the price.

"Take her," said Natasha. "I've got one hotel left."

Part of Stark wanted to tell her it was too dangerous, but it wasn't his place to do so. She was an Ultimate. She had the right to make her own decisions.

As gently as if Haggerty were still alive, Stark picked her up in his arms. Her head lolled and she flopped like a fish, her back broken. Shifting his grip on her so he could secure her to him a little better, he rode the winds back to the plaza.

He wasn't going to abandon Haggerty there on Calibana - not after what she had done. As long as he had a say in it, she would leave the island the same way as the rest of them.

"All right," said Fury, glaring at the four grim-looking Tomorrow Men seated at the briefing room table, "I want someone to explain a few things to me. First, how you got to Calibana without any visible means of transportation. Second, how your meddling in a high-profile event like a hurricane evacuation isn't going to be a problem for your precious timeline. And third, what I'm supposed to say to the news media who got pictures of you appearing and disappearing."

Weyland looked appalled. "Pictures... ?" "You're damned right," said the general. "One of the networks obtained satellite images of the rescue effort, which wound up on TV screens all over the world. They caught you materializing on the island, obviously without any help from Thor, and then dematerializing when the evac was over."

"Nice publicity for the Ultimates, except it begs a question: who are those guys in the green and

white suits, and why haven't we heard anything about them before?" He leaned back in his chair. "So who's going to give me some answers?"

Fury wasn't the only one waiting for them. Stark, Thor, and Rogers, seated around the table as well, were every bit as eager for an explanation.

"I will," Weyland said dutifully. "We traveled to Calibana and back by means of teleportation devices implanted in our nervous systems. A number of our people have them. It's the method we've developed for staying a step ahead of the tyrants."

"And you didn't see fit to tell us about these devices?" Fury asked.

Weyland looked at him. "I'll be perfectly honest, General, we needed a way to address the Tiber problem if you couldn't - or wouldn't."

"If you had that in mind all along," said Thor, "why bother enlisting our assistance at all?"

"Because," said Weyland, "the likelihood of our being able to stop Tiber by ourselves is so slim, it's statistically insignificant. That option was

only to be considered as a last resort."

"I see," said Fury. "And all this business about maintaining the integrity of the timeline... why did it go out the window when it came to Calibana?"

Weyland frowned. "Every abuse of the timeline has repercussions. Our coming here was such an abuse, despite our care in keeping it an exceptionally minor one. But it too will have repercussions, and one of them was to keep Janet Pym from participating in the rescue."

"Jan?" said Rogers, making a face.

"How was she going to contribute?" asked Stark. "Her specialties are shrinking and flying around - neither of which is much of an asset in high winds. All she would have succeeded in doing is becoming another casualty."

"I'm not at liberty to give you the details," said Weyland, "but we were trying to minimize the impact of her absence. So rather than damaging the timeline, we were trying to preserve it."

"At the cost of Haggerty's life," said Chadaputra,

a hint of recrimination in his voice.

Weyland turned to him. "There was no way we could have foreseen that."

Chadaputra shook his head. "She was too eager. You said so yourself"

"She was also better qualified than anyone else. I had no choice but to include her on the team."

It was the first time Fury had heard two of the Tomorrow Men disagree on something. To that point, it was as if they'd been speaking with one voice - usually Weyland's.

"Hang on a second," said Rogers. "Maybe I'm being a numbskull, but you folks can travel in time. If Haggerty wasn't supposed to be part of this timeline anyway, can't you just go back to the moment before she died and do something about it?"

"It's possible," Weyland conceded, "but wholly inadvisable. If we were to go back and influence the same sequence of events a second time, the risk of damage to the timeline would be compounded exponentially - and the results

would be unpredictable."

"So you might save Haggerty," Stark suggested, "but at the cost of civilization."

"Perhaps," said Kosar, "or more realistically, at the cost of the hundreds of lives we saved on Calibana. It's impossible to say."

"There's another problem," said Chadaputra, "in that the timeline has limitations. Our research tells us that it can withstand a certain amount of alteration at any given juncture. But an attempt to rewrite that juncture a second time..." He shrugged.

"What would happen?" asked Rogers.

"It would be like a videotape," said Stark, "that's used over and over again. Eventually, it's going to lose its ability to support a recording."

Weyland nodded. "An apt analogy."

"Wait a second," said Rogers, his brow furrowing. "Are you saying that part of the timeline would be erased?"

"In a manner of speaking," said Chadaputra. "Imagine a section of it simply dropping out, leaving a gap between the event before it and the event after it"

"So what happened in that spot never happened? It's just gone?" asked Fury.

Rogers sighed. "What," he asked, "does that mean in practical terms?"

"We don't know," said Kosar. "There's no precedent for us to go by. But it's clear that it wouldn't be a good thing, either for that point in the timeline or for any other."

There was silence around the table as they absorbed the remark- But it didn't lessen their frustration or their sense of loss.

"Then she's gone," said Thor.

Weyland looked tired, beaten. "I'm afraid so."

Chadaputra turned to Stark. "Haggerty's body?"

"Will be cremated," said the industrialist, "as you suggested."

"When this is all over," said Rogers, "I'd like to see to it that Haggerty is honored somehow."

"That would be much appreciated," said Weyland. "But keep in mind that if we're successful in destroying Tiber, our era will be altered - perhaps to the point where Haggerty and the rest of us will never be born."

Rogers swore to himself. "Now you're really giving me a headache. If she's not born in the future, how can she come back with you to the past? And if she doesn't come back with you to the past - "

"How can she alter the future?" asked Fury. "I'd like to know that myself."

"I know it defies common sense," said Chadaputra. "But much about time travel does that. All I can tell you, without going into an elaborate lecture about temporal mechanics, is that common sense isn't always applicable."

"Doesn't seem right," said Rogers.

The Tomorrow Man turned to him. "Not to any of us."

Fury eyed Weyland. "As far as your teleportation devices, we can't surgically remove them. But I want your word you won't use them again, under any circumstances - or all bets are off."

Weyland looked at his colleagues, then nodded. "Agreed."

Fury glanced at Nakamura. "You can take them back to their cells now."

"Aye, sir," said the guard.

Fury watched the Tomorrow Men file out. Only after they were gone and the door was closed did he say, "I'm really getting to hate this timeline business."

"I'll wager they hate it more than you do," said Stark. "You heard what they said - if they're successful, it'll be as if they never existed. What's dying next to that?"

Fury considered it. To have never been alive...

"Man," said Rogers, scanning the faces of his comrades. "Every mission I went on in World War II was potentially a suicide mission. But it

wasn't a forget-I-ever-existed mission."

Bruce Banner gazed through the transparent wall of his prison at the most beautiful woman in the world - in his opinion, anyway.

But then, Betty Ross wasn't just the Ultimates' public relations director. She was also the woman to whom Banner had been engaged until a year or so earlier, when she dyed her hair pink and suggested they take a break from each other.

A break that now seemed permanent.

Unfortunately, Betty wasn't Banner's only problem these days. But sometimes, it felt bigger than his others.

"It's a nightmare," she said. "A bona fide, grade A, ass-kicking nightmare with all the trimmings."

"Why a nightmare?" he asked, genuinely concerned.

Betty frowned. "Imagine hearing that a posse of mysterious strangers has arrived from the future to drop in on your favorite government-funded superteam. And not only that, they've come to

screw with the timeline, which happens to be the only timeline you've got - the one where you're going to retire to south Florida on your biotech-powered Roth IRA"

Banner's IRA had accumulated more than twenty thousand dollars. Not that he would ever get a chance to spend any of it.

"Bad enough," said Betty, "but at least no one's going to see these Tomorrow Men. They're a secret and there's no reason to believe they won't stay that way. Then you pop into Starbucks for your venti half-caf mocha latte-to-go and you see on the TV they've got propped up in the corner that the Tomorrow Men are helping your superteam with a nine-one-one on some Aruba-wannabe."

Is there really such a thing as a half-caf mocha latte? Banner found himself wondering. But what he said was, "It would raise some questions, I guess."

"Damned right it would raise some questions," said Betty. "And do we like questions?"

Banner had two choices. "No?"

"Not at all. So we need to come up with answers before people start distrusting the Ultimates. And they'd better be the right answers, or we'll be holding a bake sale to pay the electric bill."

He tried to picture Betty baking a cake. It would be easier to picture Thor on the pro golf tour.

"So what are you going to do?" he asked.

Betty bit her lip. "I'm thinking."

Banner liked it when she got that look on her face - the one where she pressed her lips together and the skin made a little knot between her eyebrows. He found it sexy.

"We can't claim they're from another planet," she said, thinking out loud. "Not after that business with the Chitauri. And we can't say they're part of our development program, because then we'll have to explain their disappearance when they leave."

"Right," said Banner, just trying to be supportive.

"All right," Betty said finally, "I've got it. Forty years ago, a bunch of disgruntled scientific

geniuses established a hidden colony in the frozen wastes of the Arctic. The Tomorrow Men are their kids, empowered with technologies developed by our best minds working in total seclusion. They're bound to be different from anyone we've ever seen before."

Banner made a face. "The Arctic?"

"Sure," said Betty. "Where else would you go if you wanted the world to forget you?"

A heavily guarded cubicle here in the Triskelion, he thought. But what he said was, "That's not the point. There's no electricity in the Arctic, no factories, no access to raw materials. How could these disgruntled scientists have done any work?"

Betty sighed. "Use your imagination. They brought in generators and ... I don't know, manufacturing facilities."

"How?" Banner asked. "By pack mule?"

Even before he got the last word out, he realized he had made a mistake. When Betty was making up a story for the press, she didn't like anything

to get in her way. Like reality, for instance.

It was just an inconvenience to her. And anyone who insisted on it was an inconvenience as well.

She looked at her watch, as she always did when she had endured enough of him. "Jeez, where's the time go? I've got about half a million calls to - "

"Betty," he said, cutting her off in his haste to make amends, "I didn't mean to say that. I'm just - "

"Trying to help," she said, "I know. And don't think I'm not appreciative. Stay out of trouble, okay?"

And she was on her way, her cell phone already pressed to her ear. A moment later, the doors opened for her.

" - so lonely," Banner finished.

Then the doors closed again and Betty was gone, and he was left with yet another regret.

Jan had once driven cross-country with a girlfriend from college, a rogue spring in her passenger's seat biting into her butt and making the trip seem longer than it actually was. It was nothing compared to the trip she had taken in the back of the Tiberites' truck.

But then, her cross-country jaunt had lasted only a few days, and the truck journey had already taken twice that long. And in the car, she had been able to sleep undisturbed, while in the truck she was forced to sleep with one eye open.

Not that anyone was going to notice Jan when she was wasp-sized. But it took concentration for her to maintain that stature, so she didn't go small the whole time. She resorted to that option only when confronted with the prospect of customs inspections or the Tiberites' own annoyingly frequent cargo checks.

Which was why she couldn't let herself fall asleep entirely. The last thing she wanted was for someone to pull open the truck's rear gate and

find a normal-sized sleeping beauty.

Yeah, right, Jan mused, huddling in a convenient pile of dirty blankets against the steadily increasing cold. Sleeping beauty. That's definitely me.

Next time she went on a trip like this one, she was going to bring her makeup case. Then she wouldn't look like hell when she came out on the other end.

Speaking of which... the truck had been moving slowly for hours now, jostling her left and right as if making its way over rough terrain. And the air she was breathing seemed not only markedly colder, but also markedly thinner.

Jan had a feeling that they would reach their destination soon. And when they did, she needed to be ready.

Steve Rogers felt a hand on his shoulder. Looking up, he saw that it belonged to Thor.

"I didn't hear you come in," Rogers said. As far as he had known, he was alone in the lounge.

Thor smiled sympathetically. "Captain America didn't hear a metal door open and close? He must have been pretty distracted by something. The welfare of his lady friend, perhaps?"

Rogers shrugged. "This is new for me, you know?"

"What is?" asked Thor, taking a seat on the couch across from his colleague's.

"Back in the forties, when I went overseas to fight the Nazis, I always felt bad for my fiancée. She had to wait back home, never knowing how I was or what was happening to me."

Thor's brow bunched a little. "Right. And now you're the one sitting home and worrying."

"Exactly," said Rogers.

"Not an easy thing," said Thor, "is it? But I have faith in Jan. She's tougher than she looks."

Rogers agreed. But it didn't help him worry any less.

When Jan felt the truck full of armaments come to a stop, she knew it was time for her to shrink

again.

By the time the gate rumbled open, she was insect-sized, hidden among the mess of blankets that had been keeping her warm. But even with the blankets to shield her, the blast of frigid, snow-dusted air from the outside stung her like a slap in the face.

Looking past the grubby, unshaven Tiberite whose turn it was to check the cargo, Jan saw a spectacular vista of blinding-white peaks. They looked like a crown of diamonds shining in the sun.

Not much farther now, she decided.

She would have dearly loved to remain in the truck, where she was protected from the worst of the freezing temperatures. However, it would have been rude to hog all the fun for herself. She wanted to share it with her friends.

As soon as Jan was sure the Tiberite was looking the other way, she flew past him - and immediately regretted it. The wind outside the truck was like a swarm of tiny knives, cutting mercilessly through her bodysuit into her flesh.

It was also harder for her to fly - significantly so. She had to pump twice as many times, it seemed, to cover the same distance.

Thin air will do that, she thought.

But Jan didn't have the option of returning to her shelter. It wasn't enough that she was, at long last, on the verge of finding the Tiberites' hideout. She also had to let her teammates know where it was.

Where she was.

Otherwise, she would find herself all alone in a very bad place. Even worse, Tiber would be allowed to proceed with its security upgrades unimpeded.

Fortunately, Stark had given her a trio of miniaturized, one-way comm devices. Each one was capable of transmitting a continuous signal to the nearest Stark International satellite, no matter the intervening weather conditions.

Of course, if the damned thing went on the blink, it wouldn't be the first machine ever to do so. That was why Stark had equipped her with three

of the suckers.

Taking one of them out of her belt pouch, she kissed it for luck. Then she swooped down beside the truck's rear left tire, activated the device, and laid it down in the snow.

A moment later, the Tiberite hauled the gate closed and joined his comrades in the cab of the truck. Then the vehicle took off at a crawl, its former stowaway clinging to the side of it.

Somewhere in orbit above the Earth, Tony Stark's satellite was relaying a message to the Triskelion, telling the Ultimates to get ready. Their pal the Wasp, like Gretel in the fairy tale, had dropped the first of her breadcrumbs.

Rogers fidgeted a little as he sat across the desk from Fury. "Tell me you've got good news, General."

"As a matter of fact," Fury replied, "I do. We've got a signal from Jan. That means she's getting close."

Rogers breathed a sigh of relief "When do we leave?"

"O nine hundred. I'll be alerting the others in the next few minutes."

"Got it," said Rogers, pushing out his seat and getting up.

"By the way," said Fury, "my guys are really juiced about this. Taking part in a covert op with Captain America... it's the kind of thing they can tell their grandchildren."

Rogers remembered the enthusiasm with which men had followed him into battle in World War II. Some things never changed.

"I'll try to bring them all home," he told Fury.

"I know you will," said the general.

Jan - and the truck she was using for cover against the frigid, bone-chilling wind - had been approaching a particular snow-covered slope for some time when a hole opened in it.

Except it was too geometrically perfect to call it a hole. A door, then, she thought. A door in the side of a damned mountain.

It was big enough to admit a truck, though only barely, which meant she and her ride would be trundling into the Tiberite facility in the next couple of minutes.

By then, Jan had strategically dropped two of her homing devices. Taking out the third one, she activated it and let it fall into the snow beside the truck. Then, keeping her jaw clenched so her teeth wouldn't chatter, she endured the cold just a little longer.

Unfortunately, her task wasn't over yet. A big part of it was still to come.

As Jan had expected, the truck wasn't allowed to enter the door in the mountain without a security check. A half-dozen armed men in red snow-jackets issued forth and stopped the vehicle.

First, one of them - a dark-skinned man with a goatee - spoke briefly to the Tiberites in the cab. Then he had them open the back of the truck so he could see its cargo for himself.

After a few minutes, the bearded man seemed satisfied. Pulling the gate down himself, he waved for the truck to proceed.

As Jan rode the vehicle through the doorway, she marveled at the size of the facility rising up on every side of her. Tiber appeared to have hollowed out the entire mountain, turning it into an immense atrium with at least a dozen safety-railed levels connected by stairwells as well as transparent elevators.

From a wasp's point of view, it was even more gigantic, more impressive. But she didn't have time to gawk.

Launching herself off the truck, Jan set off in search of the facility's communications center - knowing she had no more than an hour to reach it before Fury's task force arrived.

As Hogan watched his boss don his armor in the Triskelion's Iron-Tech launch hangar, he was proud of what he saw. Damned proud.

And not just of the technology that went into the metal components. He was even happier to be associated with the very human component at the heart of them all.

Someone else might have cursed his fate and the god that inflicted it on him, or bowed under the

crushing weight of it. Not Tony Stark. Not even for a second.

Of course, he didn't love the idea that he had an invader in his head, or that it would kill him some day. It wasn't fun knowing any given season might be his last. But even with that cross to bear, he had said more than once that he wouldn't change places with anyone in the world.

Because for him, it would have been a far greater tragedy never to have been Tony Stark in the first place - never to have built something huge and powerful and influential out of an idea and a knack for inspiring the confidence of investors.

That was the best part of who the man was. It wasn't having his pick of Hollywood's soft-skinned starlets, or living in circumstances so insanely luxurious that most people couldn't even have imagined them, or enjoying the respect and admiration of everyone he met.

Though those weren't bad things either.

The best part was having a say in how the world went - as a billionaire, as a business intellect unlike any other on the planet, and as a guy who

could move mountains if the technology in his armor felt like cooperating.

At the moment, Stark and the latest version of his Iron Man project were headed for a remote part of the Caucasus Mountains. It was to those coordinates that their satellite had traced Jan Pym's signal, so it was there that Fury's task force would strike.

But first it had to come together. And because this had to be a clandestine mission, it would be staged on one of SHIELD'S gargantuan heli-carriers, concealed from prying eyes by a layer of clouds several miles thick.

As Stark locked his helmet into place, he turned to Hogan and waved. See you shortly, he seemed to say, and make sure the vodka's chilled the way I like it.

Hogan waved back. Then he watched his boss activate his thrusters, rise from his launchpad, and ascend through the aperture in the hangar's ceiling.

Only when he had risen out of sight did the aperture close again. With a sigh, Hogan headed

for the exit and the Iriskelion's main building, where he would keep tabs on the Tiber mission from his console in operations.

And hope nothing went awry.

Move it, Jan exhorted herself.

Pounding her wings as hard as she could, she raced the closing security door. For a moment, it wasn't clear whether she would make it or not. Then, by the merest of margins, she slipped past it.

I'm in, she thought.

It hadn't taken Jan that long to find the Tiber facility's communications center. After all, its door was labeled in red block letters bigger than she was.

More nettlesome had been the problem of getting inside. She didn't have the strength to depress the square green stud beside the door - not at wasp size - and she couldn't get big for fear of being seen. So she had been forced to wait for a Tiberite to walk in or out.

The communications center, as it turned out, wasn't a popular place. But eventually, a thin, hollow-cheeked man had come down the corridor and pushed the stud, and walked inside.

Which gave Jan the opportunity she needed. Thank God.

Rising toward the ceiling, where she was less likely to be noticed, she took a look around. She was in a windowless, low-ceilinged room that housed a series of sleek black control panels arranged in a horseshoe shape.

Only one of the panels, in the center of the horseshoe, was occupied. The guy behind it had a paunch and a badly receding hairline, but his forearms were bigger than Jan's waist when she was normal-sized.

Flitting out toward the center of the room, she snuck a look over his shoulder. It seemed he was scrolling through a log of recent communications.

But not sending, Jan thought. That's good. Don't want to cut him off in the middle of a message.

Slowly, she descended behind him, trying not to

draw his attention. Then again, he was so intent on his screen that he probably wouldn't have noticed a parade of wasps.

But he would notice her soon.

When Jan reached the level of the guy's ear, she zapped it with her sting as hard as she could. Suddenly the guy was on his feet, slapping at the offending appendage - and probably wondering, somewhere beyond his pain, how a stinging insect had made it into the mountain.

But by then, she was no longer in the vicinity of his ear. She was under his chin, stinging him in the jaw. And when his hand went to that spot, she came around and needled him in the back of the neck.

Cursing out loud, the guy flailed at her - to no avail. Though he was pushing a considerable amount of air around, she had eluded better flailers in her day.

Finally, Jan had him just where she wanted him. Diving, she zapped him through his sock. When he brought his foot up, leaving himself standing only on the other, she rose again and launched a

lightning series of attacks to the face - forcing her adversary to trip over his chair and smash his head on the console behind him.

It didn't quite knock him unconscious. But it dazed him enough for her to grow to full height and deliver a kick to his jaw. His eyes rolling back in his head, he dropped to the floor.

Leaving Jan the fox in the proverbial henhouse.

It felt good to relax her concentration, to be normal-sized again. And it felt even better to lock the door to the communications center from the inside.

After all, it wasn't just this Tiber stronghold they wanted to scour out. It was all of them. And to do that, they would have to keep the others from finding out the fate of this one.

Hence the communications blackout Jan had just instituted. And when the raid was over, Stark's men would install a program to send a series of dummy messages to the rest of the network.

Of course, they had to take this place before they could worry about any of the others.

Jan wished she could give her teammates a hand. However, she had to make certain her friend with the paunch didn't wake and try to send out a distress call.

Pulling out a chair, she sat down and waited for the task force to arrive.

12

"Ready?" Thor asked.

Fury nodded. 'Whenever you are.'

Thor glanced at Stark, whose Iron Man armor looked resplendent in the brassy, high-altitude sunlight. Then he turned to Rogers, who was adorned with the red, white, and blue of Captain America.

Both of them were symbols of everything Thor had come to distrust in the world. And yet, he felt good about going into battle with them, considering the characters of the men behind the

masks.

Then there were the other Ultimates - Black Widow and Hawkeye, Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch. Though the first two weren't covert operatives any longer, all four of them were used to working quickly and efficiently in hostile environments.

Last of all, the son of Odin scanned the faces of the fourteen khaki-uniformed SHIELD operatives whom Fury had hand-picked for this mission. They looked focused, prepared to go into action at a moment's notice.

Though if all goes well, Thor reflected, they'll have a bit more preparation time than that.

No one seemed the least bit discomfited by the fact that they were standing on the deck of a heli-carrier some thirty thousand feet above the Caucasus Mountains. Which was strange, considering most mortals get jittery on their garage roofs.

On the other hand, none of the heli-carriers had ever lost anyone overboard - or so Fury insisted.

The plan was for Thor to transport himself into Tiber's hideout, then bring the rest of them down with him. Except for Stark, who would descend on his own power to watch for Tiberites who managed to escape the mountain.

Despite the difficulty everyone seemed to have with Thor's godhood, they had gotten comfortable with his godlike abilities in no time. In fact, they seemed to take them all for granted.

But Thor himself didn't take them for granted. He couldn't imagine himself ever doing that.

Especially since he hadn't always been aware of his identity, much less the extent of his abilities. Oh, he knew even as an adolescent that there was something different about him, that he had been chosen to do great things. He just didn't know by whom, or what those great things might be.

It's all right, he remembered telling himself at the time, his heart full of youthful optimism. It will all be revealed soon enough.

But as the years passed, he came no closer to the truth of his existence than he had before. He

eventually fell into a career as a nurse, working in one institution or another - but not because that was what he wanted from life. It was just that he had to eat, and it seemed nobler to help people than to take part in the myriad business schemes that injured them.

It wasn't until three weeks short of his thirtieth birthday that Odin plucked him from Midgard, in spirit if not in body, and brought him to Mimir's Well. It was there, beneath towering oaks and circling eagles, that the All-Father had received his wisdom from the inky-black waters. It was there that Thor received wisdom as well.

Kneeling beside the well, with his father standing at his side, he had cupped his hands and dipped them into the water, and drank. With each sip, he felt as if a veil were being drawn away from a face.

And the face was his.

Suddenly, he knew who and what he was, and why the knowledge had been kept from him all that time. Odin had made a mortal of Thor and set his feet on the earth of Midgard so he could see things as mortals saw them, and understand

better how to make the world of men pure again.

Humanity was abusing its world in every way possible, stumbling slowly but inevitably toward the brink of destruction. Someone had to wind the horn of warning before it was too late, and Thor was the one who had been chosen.

When he returned to Midgard, seeing his mission clearly for the first time, eighteen months had passed. His body had spent that time languishing in an asylum for the insane, where he had been placed by the Norwegian authorities. An easy mistake, he thought, considering his mind had been on another world.

But it was back. And with mind and body aligned, he was no longer the man he had been. He was Thor, son of Odin All-Father, wielder of heaven's lightning. He could perform feats of unimaginable strength and endurance, and traverse the Nine Worlds with but a thought.

So really, it was no trouble at all to transport himself to the heart of the Tiberite installation, where no one could reasonably have expected an invader to appear without warning.

"See you down there," he told his comrades.

A moment later, he found himself in a storage room deep in the bowels of the mountain. It was big enough to contain the task force and remote enough for them to be able to spread out from that spot before the Tiberites knew what was happening.

Perfect, he thought.

As lightnings played around his hammer, he drew the rest of the force down there with him.

Steve Rogers looked around and made certain his teammates and Fury's men had materialized alongside him in the storage room. Then he headed for the door, touched the pressure-sensitive control that sent it sliding open, and moved out into the corridor.

There was a single Tiberite out there. Seeing Rogers in his Captain America uniform, he froze for a moment.

Nothing like the element of surprise, Rogers thought.

Before the fellow could yell for help or try to get away, the red, white, and blue shield of Captain America caught him in the temple and sent him sprawling. Rogers didn't have to check to see if the Tiberite was still conscious. He just caught the returning shield, stepped over his victim, and continued down the corridor.

Fortunately, Thor's thus-far-inexplicable teleportation ability involved some measure of insight into his destination. As a result, he had been able to give them a crude sense of the facility's layout while they were still on the heli-carrier.

So Rogers knew he would find a stairwell at the end of the corridor, and where it led, and approximately how long it would take to get there. It was invaluable information.

However, Thor wouldn't be joining them on their little foray. Having deposited them all in the lion's den, he was going to join Stark outside.

Rogers didn't mind. The last thing he wanted on a mission like this one was a guy whose hammer could demolish structural supports and discharge high-voltage electricity.

The idea, after all, was to incapacitate the Tiberites, not to bring the mountain crashing down on top of them.

When Rogers reached the door to the stairwell, he opened it and led the way inside. Then he took the stairs two at a time, expecting those behind him to do the same.

The first level he came to gave access to the kitchen and the mess hall. He passed them up, wondering for just a fraction of a second if they had ever served pineapple pizza.

No, he thought. Don't think of her. That'll come later.

Early in his World War II career, he had blundered into a hail of bullets because he was thinking of his fiancée instead of his work. He had vowed never to make that mistake a second time.

The level above the mess was the one Rogers wanted. With a glance back over his shoulder to make sure everyone was in synch, he depressed the control that governed the door.

As it opened, he went into action.

The space Rogers entered was immense, even bigger than he had expected. And there were as many as a hundred and fifty Tiberites inside it, gathered here and there around the computer workstations that lined the walls, discussing events in the world outside their mountain.

Perhaps two dozen of them were standing by the entrance, wearing red snow jackets and cradling rifles. The rest carried sidearms in shoulder holsters.

Pulling his shield back, Rogers flung it into one cluster of Tiberites. Then, without waiting to see the result, he took down two other men with a cross-body block.

He had seen what followed so many times that he could break it down into bite-size chunks. First, the fraction of a moment in which his enemies caught sight of him. Then the one in which they raised their weapons, followed by the one in which they aimed, and finally the one in which they fired.

Hauling in his shield as it returned to him, Rogers crouched behind it to deflect the angry barrage. Then he charged a knot of adversaries, bowling

them over like tightly packed dominoes.

Using his momentum, he planted his hand on someone's shoulder and vaulted over the pack - just in time to face another one. Going low, he swept the feet of one out from under one man, jabbed a second with the edge of his shield, and turned sideways to avoid the weapons fire of the third.

Before he could aim again, Rogers laid him out with a right cross. Then he nailed someone in the belly with a side-kick and clanged someone else in the face with his shield.

And for a single, bizarre moment, Rogers was certain he was fighting the Nazis again.

After all, he had fought so many of them - in the streets of nameless French towns and in sprawling Gothic castles, in well-scrubbed underground research facilities and on sinister midnight supply trains. He had fought them with his fists and with his shield, every way and everywhere one could fight them, until all the raids and all the rescues blurred into one screaming, blood-flecked madness.

But that was in a different world.

In the one he lived in now, there was an objective to be met, a battle to be won. And he would be damned if he was going to let anyone keep him from winning it.

Seeing Captain America go in one direction, Natasha Romanov went in the other.

She found her first target still drawing the handgun from his shoulder holster. Planting her heel in his face, she snapped his head back. Then she whirled and took him down with a harder kick to the base of his skull.

Naturally, that drew the attention of his comrades. But Natasha flattened herself as they fired, allowing the bullets to pass over her head. And before they could adjust, she was somersaulting through the air, automatic weapons sliding into her hands from the feeders beneath her sleeves.

Before she hit the floor, she had taken out all four of them. Not with killing shots, just disabling ones. After all, Fury wouldn't be happy without people to interrogate.

Then she flicked her wrists and slid the guns back into her sleeves. For one thing, she didn't want to hit any SHIELD operatives with friendly fire. For another, she only used firearms when she really needed to.

Natasha much preferred the satisfaction she got from hand-to-hand combat. The challenge of reading an opponent, adjusting to his intentions - and executing just the right move to take him down.

Nor was she concerned about getting hurt, or even killed. That was for amateurs.

Because there was a rhythm to these things, a slashing, leaping, cutting, rolling rhythm. And once she was in it, immersed in it and absorbed by it, she knew she wouldn't be touched. Not by an enemy's hand, not by a knife, not even by a bullet.

She might as well have been invulnerable.

People always remarked on Clint Barton's accuracy. It was what had gotten him the nickname "Hawk-eye."

But he wasn't just the most accurate marksman in the world. He was also the quickest.

Barton didn't know why he could fire a half-dozen arrows faster than a gunman could unload the same number of bullets. He just could. Which was why Fury had never suggested he switch to a more conventional choice of weapon.

Sometimes, it was up to him to take out a roomful of bad guys all by himself. This wasn't one of those times. With all the help he had, he didn't need to go on the offensive. He could concentrate on protecting the other members of the task force.

Not Rogers or Natasha - they didn't need protection. But the other SHIELD operatives, despite their training, were only human. They couldn't see an enemy drawing a bead on them from across the room.

Which was where Barton came in.

Knocking an arrow, he took aim and fired at the perpetrator of just such a sneak attack - a man in a red jacket trying to put a hole through one of Fury's people. Before he could pull his trigger, he

was sent spinning with an arrow in his shoulder.

Catching sight of a gunman with an equally promising line of fire, Barton released another shaft.

It not only pierced the gunman's hand, but nailed it to the back of one of his colleagues.

Two for the price of one, the archer thought.

Then he whirled and put another arrow through a Tiberite standing behind him. Looking amazed, the man dropped his gun, clutched the part of the shaft protruding from his middle, and crumpled to the floor.

Because I deserve a little protection too, Barton reflected, as he loaded up again and looked for another shot.

By the time Thor transported himself into the frigid air above the mountain, Iron Man was already dueling with a couple of small, airborne attack craft.

They weren't the first ones Stark and his armor had confronted, judging by the fiery, smoking

wreck in the valley below. And they wouldn't be the last, for several more were issuing from an egress in the side of the mountain.

The craft were extremely maneuverable and extremely fast - more so than anything Thor had seen before. And they seemed to have firepower to spare.

He was glad he had shown up when he did. Left alone, Stark might have been overwhelmed by the squadron. His power, after all, was the power of mortals.

And Thor's was something more than that.

As the aircraft recognized they had a second foe, a trio of them came after him and opened fire. But he was fast too. With an exertion of will, he skyrocketed out of harm's way.

Then it was Thor's turn to attack.

Swinging Mjolnir in the direction of the farthest flier, he released a blue-white bolt. As it skewered its target, the craft became a smoking, plummeting wreck. Its pilot ejected himself just before his vehicle collided with the side of a

mountain and erupted into flames.

The SHIELD people would see to the pilot's apprehension, now that he was deprived of his craft. Thor's business was with the fliers still in the air.

Forging ahead through wisps of cloud, he took aim at another craft. Again, his lightning tore through the heavens. Again, it ripped a flier off its course and sent it plunging back to Earth,

Thor was so intent on it, he didn't notice the adversary behind him until it was almost too late. But at the last moment, he caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye.

Twisting in midair, he avoided a collision - but only by the merest margin imaginable. He was so close to the flier, he could feel the air displaced by its passage, and glimpse the expression on the face of its pilot.

There was no fear in it, no sign that the fellow was the least bit intimidated. But there was curiosity, and understandably so. How often did one find oneself in combat against a god?

Thor almost felt sorry for the fellow. Almost.

Still, he speared the craft with Mjolnir's fury, tearing a wing off and sending it spiraling groundward. He watched it just long enough to see the pilot spring himself from the wreckage. Then he turned and set his sights on another target.

13

Fury whistled as he walked through the cavernous facility his task force had just secured.

Pretty impressive, he thought.

But then, Tiber had had more than ten centuries to hollow out this hiding place. Given that long a span, it could have done the job with a spoon.

At the moment, the only Tiberites in evidence were the ones being slipped into body bags by SHIELD'S cleanup crew. Thor had already moved the living ones, nearly a hundred of them, to the

heli-carrier for transport back home.

The general's interrogation teams would be putting in overtime. Of course, most of the Tiber people would keep their mouths shut, knowing the worst SHIELD could do was give them to the governments against whom they had committed crimes.

But a few would talk, knowing how some of those governments treated criminals. And a few were all they needed to round out the electronic data SHIELD would be mining.

"Sir?" said a familiar voice.

Fury turned in response and saw Jasper Sitwell approaching him. It was a good thing, since Sitwell was the SHIELD agent in charge of mop-up.

He looked like he was fresh out of Harvard Law, with his white teeth, his rimless glasses, and his power haircut. But he was as down-and-dirty as any grunt when he had to be.

"What's our communications status?" the general asked.

"Secure," said Sitwell. "The Wasp saw to that."

Fury nodded. "Outstanding. And Dugan?"

"We found him in a corridor on level ten. It seems he ran into some Tiberites trying to make use of an exit we hadn't accounted for. Took a few bullets, I'm afraid, but none that will keep him from running another marathon."

"Good to hear," said Fury.

Then something else occurred to him. "Aren't the Bobbsy twins down here somewhere?" He had seen Thor, Jan, Rogers, Stark, Natasha, and Barton on the heli-carrier, but not Pietro or Wanda.

Sitwell jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Over there, sir."

Fury followed the gesture to the far side of the room, where he saw a couple of-figures, one male and one female, dressed in the black outfits favored by covert ops. They were standing off to the side as usual, part of the team and yet apart from it.

Pietro's arm was wrapped around his sister's shoulders as if he wanted to shelter her from every evil in the world. Or maybe it wasn't shelter he wanted to give her - Fury was never sure.

He was just glad he didn't have a sister who looked like Wanda. Life is complicated enough, he reflected.

Because it was his job, the general went over to speak with the mutants. They watched him with an unmistakable wariness in their eyes. Of course, there were those who hated and feared their kind, so maybe they were justified in looking at him that way - even if he himself wasn't guilty of those emotions.

"Let me guess," he said. "You were in here fighting the whole time, right?"

"Where else would we be?" asked Wanda.

"And had we not been here," Pietro chimed in, "how would you have survived the packs of ravening attack dogs? Especially the third one, with all the Dobermans?"

Attack dogs? "I didn't hear anything about any attack dogs," Fury told him.

"Of course you didn't," Pietro replied, a quirk of amusement pulling at the corner of his mouth.

The general grunted. Why do I even ask?

Then he realized that Pietro was wearing a leather jacket over his bodysuit. The suit and the jacket were the same color - black - so the general hadn't noticed the change right away.

"Where did you get the threads?" he asked Pietro.

The mutant shrugged. "From an old friend."

Fury would require a more thorough explanation later. At the moment, he had the inside of a mountain to check out.

It wasn't until the third day after SHIELD'S takeover of the Tiber facility that Jan managed to cut her hot-shower regimen from three a day, alternating with heavy doses of Steve Rogers, to only one.

She had just finished taking that shower and was

visiting the Triskelion's southeast lounge to catch the evening news when she glimpsed someone dozing on one of the couches. Hogan, she realized, recognizing the wingtip shoes he favored.

Loathe to wake him up, Jan started back the way she had come in. Then she heard Hogan's voice.

"It's all right," he told her. "I'm not asleep. It's just my eyes that are tired."

Looking back over her shoulder, she saw that he was sitting up. "Still working on the Tiber data?" she asked.

"Not anymore," said Hogan, suppressing a yawn. "We're finished."

"Already?" said Jan.

She was hardly an expert on computer operations. But it seemed to her that a cult as old and widely distributed as Tiber would have had more information to sift through than the Pentagon.

"Not completely finished," he amended. "We

could have spent weeks on the encrypted files alone - and eventually we will, because it looks like there's information there on all kinds of illegal activities, not just the ones in which Tiber was involved directly. Assassinations, sabotage, drug-running, you name it. But for now, we've got what we need."

"You mean with regard to their other hideouts."

"Damned right. One of them is discussed in great detail. It was just completed recently, and there was a bunch of talk about how and when certain building materials were going to arrive."

"So we've got... what?" Jan asked. "One more target?"

"So far," Hogan told her. "But we also captured the transmission logs. If we can do that at a second location, we can - "

"Triangulate," said Jan, whose father had been an oceanographer before he met her mom, "and flag every receiver on the Tiber map. But not until we've taken down another hideout."

"In a nutshell," said Hogan, "yes."

"Where is this second location?" she wondered.

"In the Andes. Twenty-eight degrees latitude, seventy-six degrees longitude, just under eleven thousand feet of elevation. The good news is it's not as cold as the place in the Caucasus, The bad news is it's pretty damned close,"

'You're talking to a woman who spent six days in an unheated truck," said Jan. "I'm ready for the weather."

Hogan looked sympathetic. "That's good to hear. From what I understand, you're leaving the day after tomorrow"

Stark knew full well he didn't have to visit the captured Tiber facility. With all the accumulated SHIELD brainpower there, another cook would only spoil the broth.

But he wasn't going there to get involved in the process of data extraction and analysis. He just wanted to see what the place looked like at his leisure.

It was a piece of history, after all - and secret history at that. A peephole into a subculture that

had survived undetected for seven hundred years, despicable though it might be.

Like an archeological excavation, the industrialist mused as he soared over a breathtaking maze of pristine white mountains, but without the shovels.

It wasn't as if he was needed anywhere else that day. He had no business meetings, no charity events. Besides, he wanted to see how his new armor handled a long flight.

So far, Stark thought as he came in sight of Tiber's mountain, it's handled it quite well.

There hadn't been anything even suggestive of a malfunction. Even his normally cranky structural integrity field - a force matrix generated between the inner and outer layers of his armor - was working like a charm.

Stark was about to open a communications link when he realized the facility's front door was open. How's that for hospitality? he asked himself though he wondered if a little more caution might not have been in order.

Not that a lot of planes or other vehicles were likely to brave these mountains. But one never knew.

I'll have to talk to Sitwell about that, he thought, as he swooped through the man-made opening.

There was a truck inside, the one in which Jan had snuck into the place. But no SHIELD people, Stark observed. Or rather, none that he could see.

Stark ascended through the atrium, looking for one of the two dozen agents assigned to the place. But he couldn't find anyone.

How odd, he thought.

Then, with the help of his auditory enhancements, Stark heard something behind him. The click of something on the floor, near the entrance.

Relieved that he wasn't alone, he used his thrusters to whirl in midair. But it wasn't one of Fury's SHIELD personnel he found himself confronting.

It was a Tomorrow Man, in the white and green jumpsuit Stark had come to associate with his kind. .

Had that been the only surprise Stark was compelled to absorb, it would have been enough to send his mind reeling in search of answers. But in the same moment, it occurred to him that this was a Tomorrow Man he had never seen before.

The fellow was thin to the point of scrawniness, with a wild, red goatee, so there was no mistaking him for the others. Almost too late, Stark saw the Tomorrow Man's hand go up.

Stark had seen that gesture before, back in the Triskelion, when he got his first glimpse of the intruders. He knew what it meant, and he didn't want to feel its impact a second time.

With a spurt of thruster power, he managed to dodge the ensuing energy blast. Then he fired back, only to find himself frustrated by the same kind of force field Weyland had used.

A second time, the Tomorrow Man attacked him with a beam of destructive force. And a second

time, Stark made him miss. But he was clearly at a disadvantage.

Then he heard another click on the floor and realized there was someone in back of him. Twisting in midair, he saved himself from the full brunt of the blast that followed.

He saw another Tomorrow Man he had never seen before - a stocky specimen with dark skin and light eyes. And there were two others right behind him.

Think, Stark demanded of himself.

Whatever had happened to Fury's people, the Tomorrow Men had something to do with it. Or maybe it was some other group from the future, in some way opposed to Weyland's. Either way, Stark had to get word back to the Triskelion.

Unfortunately, it wouldn't be easy to get out of there with the Tomorrow Men standing in his way. So he chose a different path - one that took him up to the twelfth and highest level of the atrium.

Caving in a metal door with his pulse emitters,

he surmounted the safety rail and invaded a room that had served as living quarters for the Tiberites. It was empty at the moment, which was a good thing, since it would take him a few seconds to bludgeon a hole in its foot-thick rear wall.

What lay beyond it, according to the layouts they had drawn of the place, was the hangar for the one-man aircraft he and Thor had put out of business. If Stark was lucky, he wouldn't encounter any resistance there as he tried to make his exit.

Who knows? he thought, pounding at the wall with the power of his metal fists. Maybe they left the back door as wide open as the front one.

As the pulverized cement fell away, Stark got his first glimpse of the hangar. Indeed, it looked unoccupied, though he was certain it wouldn't remain that way for long.

But there was something about it that felt wrong. A result of the lighting, perhaps? Or maybe a malfunction in his armor's sensory hardware?

He was still trying to figure it out when he felt

something ram him in the small of his back, smashing him face first into a part of the wall that was still intact. Turning, he saw a Tomorrow Man standing in the open doorway, his palm raised for another shot.

Throwing himself out of the way, Stark saw the violet beam strike the wall instead, putting the finishing touches on his escape hole. Unhesitatingly, he flew through it.

And saw what was wrong - very wrong - in the hangar.

Part of the left-hand wall was gone. In its place stood a swirling depth of black energy that seemed to offer access to something, though Stark couldn't begin to guess what.

As he hovered there, enthralled by the sight of the energy maelstrom, his pursuer took another shot at him. It drove him into the far wall, just above the hangar doors.

Snap out of it, Stark told himself, angry about his lapse.

He looked around for a control panel that would

open the doors, which looked too thick to pound through in the short time allotted to him. A moment later, that became no time at all, as a half-dozen Tomorrow Men swarmed into the hangar.

Stark swore under his breath. Now what?

Spreading out, the Tomorrow Men fired their beams at him from all angles, forcing him into one evasive maneuver after another. And none of it was getting him any closer to leaving the place.

Then he miscalculated - badly - and two energy bolts hit him at once, sending him pinwheeling wildly in a direction he hadn't intended, stunned despite the protection his armor afforded him.

Before Stark could pull out of it, a third beam hammered him from behind, making him spin even faster. Too late, he saw the black whirlpool looming, threatening to engulf him.

For a moment, he felt cold such as he had never felt before. Then his mind drained away into the darkness.

Fury was going over plans for the Andes mission for the third and final time when he heard a knock on his door and saw Happy Hogan enter the room.

Normally, Hogan was the cheerful sort, the guy one could always count on to lighten things up. But at the moment, he looked as if he had lost his best friend.

"We may have a problem," he said.

"What is it?" Fury asked.

"We haven't been able to raise Mister Stark since he left for the Caucasus facility. And that was nine hours ago."

More than enough time for him to get there, the general reflected.

"We need to contact the facility," said Hogan.

"And I don't have the authority to..."

"Say no more," Fury told him.

Swiveling in his seat, he punched a command into his keyboard, opening a text channel to Tiber One. Then he sent a message asking if anyone there had heard from Stark lately.

In little more than a minute, he got his answer: Negative.

"I was afraid of that," said Hogan, his tone flat and grim.

"Let's not jump to conclusions," said Fury.

But he was concerned as well. After all, it wasn't like Stark to go incommunicado. Of course, there was another way to locate him, to which only the general had access.

Logging out of his link to Tiber One, he tapped in another command. This one connected him with a tiny black box in the Iron Man armor, the same kind that planes carried. It was planted there so they could find Stark's remains if he ever went down.

But there was no response from the black box. Strange, thought Fury. That box is supposed to be able to withstand almost anything. And yet it was as silent as Stark himself.

Fury didn't know if that was good news or bad.

"What's going on?" Banner asked his guards.

He was always the last to know anything going on in the Triskelion. The downside of living in a goldfish bowl.

"It's Mister Stark," said Warshovsky, looking none too happy about the news. "He's gone missing."

"Missing... ?" Banner echoed.

"Eleven hours now," said Crespo. "There's a device in his armor that's supposed to let us know where he is, even if he went down somewhere. But there's no response from it."

Not good, thought Banner, understanding the implications.

"Everybody's pretty broken up about it," said Warshovsky. "He was a good guy."

Banner thought so too. He found it hard to believe that someone who had battled the Chitauri and survived could have just disappeared. But it was possible, wasn't it?

He remembered Stark complaining about the vagaries of his armor's various leading-edge technologies. There was always some small thing going wrong with them, it seemed.

Maybe this time it was a big thing, the scientist allowed.

Natasha was standing in the north lounge, staring out the window at the wind-stippled water and the crowded tip of lower Manhattan, when she heard someone approaching.

It was Clint. She could tell by a half-dozen cues, not to mention his reflection in the window glass. Silently, solemnly, he came to stand beside her.

Finally, he spoke up. "I always figured it would be one of us. Not one of the headliners. And especially not him."

Natasha had figured the same thing. Stark was a survivor, a man who could have taught cats to

land on their feet. It was hard to believe he was dead. Very hard.

"I know how you felt about him," said Clint. "So if you..."

"Need a shoulder to cry on?" She shook her head. "You know me better than that."

He remained beside her a moment longer. Then he said, "I've got to get home. I promised the kids I would tuck them in."

"See you," she told him. And heard his footsteps as he departed.

Natasha made a sound of disgust deep in her throat. Clint was right, of course. She had cared for Stark.

She wasn't sure when she had realized that. Not in the men's room before the battle against the Chitauri - that really had been an impulse born of pre-battle jitters, his even more than hers. Later, then?

Yes. In the aftermath of the battle for Earth, when Rogers was addressing the troops, making

them feel good about having repelled an alien invasion.

Stark was standing off to the side, inscrutable behind his metal mask, his arms folded across his thick metal chest. He looked like power incarnate-as long as one didn't look too closely.

But Natasha knew the man inside the metal shell, and knew how different he was from his suit of armor. How fallible.

How human.

And that was the thing she came to love about him. Not the technology-powered air of invincibility. Not the force he could exert on the world, or the heights to which he could rise above it.

But the frailty of the man within the metal casing.

He wasn't a juggernaut like Rogers or Thor, or the aliens they were fighting. He was just a guy with an idea and the stubborn courage to see it through. Or the stupidity. Either way, she found it incredibly sexy.

But Natasha couldn't tell him so. He was so determined to be the bon vivant, the man about town, that he would have shied from her attentions like a deer downwind of a timber wolf.

So she played hard to get, as he eventually surmised. And little by little, she drew him to her, luring him into her web. But then, back in the Soviet Union, her superiors had nicknamed her the Black Widow for good reason.

With a little more time, Natasha would have caught Stark for good. She was certain of it. But time had run out on them.

Stark wasn't sure how long he had listened to the bird cries, thinking them part of an especially persistent and disturbing nightmare, before he opened his eyes and peered through the optical filters in his mask.

Only then did he see where he was - in the charred, half-ruined shell of what had once been a brick building, its windows reduced to short, jagged shards of glass, its floor littered with piles of rubble and unidentifiable debris.

What the hell... ? he thought.

The last thing he remembered was spinning through the air of the Tiberites' hangar, propelled by the beams of the Tomorrow Men. No - there was something else.

The black whirlpool-thing. A feeling of extreme cold as he became immersed in it, as if all the heat had been leeched out of him. A sense that the world was fading around him.

And now, Stark thought, here I am. Wherever that may be.

The bird cries were getting louder, closer. Then he realized they weren't bird cries at all. They were shouts torn from human throats, albeit in an accent he had never heard before.

And they were vibrating with urgency.

Out of curiosity as much as self-preservation, the industrialist got to his feet and approached one of the shattered windows. Now we'll see what's out there, he thought.

Just in time to see something explode in his face.

Instinctively, he dropped to his knees - but it was too late. He had already been bludgeoned with chunks of brick and masonry, enough to kill him were it not for the protection afforded him by his armor.

Only in the aftermath of the explosion did Stark realize what had happened. The right side of the window frame had been sent flying at him by a blast of violet energy.

The same kind the Tomorrow Men use.

The incident made him more cautious. If someone out there was in league with the people who had fired at him, he didn't want to make himself too easy a target.

Raising his head, he peered out through the remains of the window. And as no one greeted him with a face full of shattered brick this time, he had a moment to survey the situation three or four stories below him.

Apparently, he was in the midst of a firefight - one sprawling across a bizarre grid of overgrown ruins and what looked like streets except for the

greenery flooding through them.

The combatants on his right were distinguished by dark blue uniforms and a certain amount of discipline. Clearly they were the aggressors, slowly but certainly gaining ground as they followed their energy barrages with short, controlled advances.

The group on his left was made up of what looked like civilians, lacking uniforms as well as organization. They were armed with energy weapons as well. But they repeatedly had to pull back, quite clearly getting the worst of the exchange.

Naturally, Stark's heart went out to the latter faction - an impulse he was forced to question. In his companies' dealings with undeveloped nations, he had encountered enough noble dictators and unprincipled "freedom fighters" to know appearances could be deceiving.

The one thing he could be absolutely sure of, based on the evidence before him, was that he was no longer in the world to which he had been born. That reality didn't have energy weapons, except for the few the Tomorrow Men had

brought with them.

But the world of the future did.

It was a difficult conclusion for Stark to embrace - more difficult, somehow, than the notion that human beings could travel from the future to the twenty-first century.

The Tomorrow Men, after all, were people like anyone else. They were dressed differently, equipped differently, but they were people all the same. It was the implications they brought with them that were hard to accept- - especially for people like Fury, who had been trained to think in concrete terms.

Stark hadn't had any trouble with the concept of visitors from the future. Having been immersed in theory all his life, he was able to deal with that.

But to be ensconced in that future time, to see and feel and hear it firsthand - that was an infinitely more bizarre experience than simply meeting the Tomorrow Men. It was the difference between having cocktails with Jacques Cousteau and being abandoned at the bottom of the ocean.

If it was the black maelstrom that had sent him there, it was some kind of time-travel device, one the Tomorrow Men had gone to great lengths to install in the mountain. But what did they need it for? What were they planning on doing with it?

Lots of questions, he thought. No answers.

As Stark followed the battle, the uniformed force continued to push the civilians back. Apparently, the former had the superior weaponry, their violet blasts longer-ranged and significantly more destructive than those of their adversaries.

Nonetheless, there were pockets in which the civilians held their ground. One of them was in the weed-choked street directly beneath Stark, where both sides were using piles of debris for cover and firing across a span of perhaps fifty yards.

He winced as one of the uniformed men was skewered with a violet energy beam, the force of which sent him hurtling backward. But for the most part, the battle was a stalemate.

Suddenly, a woman emerged from the hollowed-out structure opposite Stark's, right in the middle

of the fight. And as she fled from the uniformed men, she seemed to waddle rather than run.

Then Stark saw why the woman looked so awkward. She had a child clutched to her chest - a toddler, it seemed to him, though he was hardly an expert on children.

The tiny life in the woman's arms didn't seem to deter the uniformed combatants in the least. They continued to fire their energy bolts, missing the woman only because she stumbled and fell providently behind a grassy mound.

That was all Stark needed to see.

No matter what enmities existed between these people, no matter what had driven them to fight in the first place, there was no excuse for shooting at children. And no excuse for me to sit here and watch it happen.

Taking a running jump, he launched himself through the battered window. And as he went horizontal, he activated the thrusters in the heels of his metal boots.

Suddenly, he was free of the building, soaring

over the battle. It unfolded beneath him like a map, exposing parts of it he hadn't seen from his vantage point.

It was even bigger than he had thought, stretching a quarter mile in front of him and almost that far behind, all the way to a body of water he didn't recognize. Then he saw something in the water, and it registered with him after all.

How could it not? The immense statue of Lady Liberty was half-submerged, but there was no mistaking her torch. It jutted out of the harbor toward Stark at a sad but defiant angle, telling him - as difficult as it was to believe - that he was in New York City. Or rather, what had been New York City once upon a time.

But there were no longer any skyscrapers crowding the southernmost tip of Manhattan. No Brooklyn Bridge. No Empire State Building. They had all been leveled, either by violence or neglect or both.

All this Stark observed in a fraction of a second. Then he was swooping toward the woman with the child in her arms, who had started running

again.

Scooping her up, he carried her straight back over the ranks of her fellow civilians. When he got to a place where he saw other women and children, all of them retreating as quickly as they could, he set his charges down.

The woman shouted something to him that sounded like "Thank you." But he couldn't really tell, because he was already rocketing back in the other direction, heading for the front lines.

When Stark caught sight of the uniformed troops in the distance, he activated his pulse generators.

Then, just as soon as he was close enough, he made a statement.

It didn't rely on words, but it was eloquent all the same. And memorable, he hoped, as he watched a handful of aggressors fall under the impact of his pulse attack.

Their comrades weren't so intimidated that they didn't fire back. But by the time they got Stark in their sights he was somewhere else, his armor's

propulsion system keeping him a step ahead of their energy bursts.

A second time, he raked the aggressors with his pulse emitters. And a second time, a bunch of them fell like wheat under a sharp and well-swung scythe.

As before, they returned fire, their energy beams crisscrossing around him as thick as bees. But he found a path through them, however tortuous, and wheeled for another pass.

By then, someone in charge had decided to change tactics. Stark could tell because the uniformed figures were pulling back, abandoning the fight - and their own casualties - for the moment.

Stark was glad to see it. Nice to deal with someone who has some sense, he reflected.

Then he saw an eruption of orange light from far away - as if a tiny sun had somehow come catapulting over the horizon. But it wasn't far away for long. It bore down on him with frightening speed, coming for him faster than his mind could register.

Stark twisted sideways and applied thrust, hoping to elude the ball of fire. But he couldn't avoid it altogether.

With a terrible roar, it dealt him a glancing blow - one that nonetheless came close to ripping his head off. He found himself hurtling end over end, unable to tell in what direction.

Come on, he told himself, refusing to give in to the vertigo threatening to claim him. Pull it together.

That was when Stark saw the ground rushing up at him and veered to avoid it. Continuing in the same direction, he gained altitude until his head cleared, and then surveyed the battlefield.

The aggressors were forging ahead again to the detriment of the civilians. And there was another fireball growing on the horizon, no doubt with Stark's name on it

But he wasn't going to wait for it to find him. With a touch of the thruster control in his gauntlet, he sent himself plummeting back to Earth again.

Inches from the ground, he pulled out of his dive - right in the midst of the surprised blue suits. And the fireball, rather than pursuing him, passed harmlessly overhead.

So as long as he remained among the aggressors, he was safe. From the fireball, at least. The uniformed men themselves were spread out enough to get a shot in.

Which was why he had to keep moving, zigzagging unpredictably. And at the same time, try to do some damage.

The longer he kept the aggressors busy, the more time the civilians would have to retreat. That is, if they chose to do so, as he fervently hoped they would.

It was also possible they would see the enemy was distracted and rally for a counterattack. And if they did that, there would be little he could do to stop them.

But the civilians continued to draw back. And for his part, he continued to weave among the aggressors, sending bone-jarring pulse-impacts through their ranks.

When they fired their energy blasts at him, they hit each other if they hit anything at all. Every few seconds another uniformed figure fell, either by Stark's hand or that of a comrade.

After a while, the aggressors began to yield ground again, unable to cope with the man in the metal suit. But he didn't let up. Not until his adversaries were running from him full tilt, squeezing off only a token shot now and then to keep him off their tails.

Stark thought he might see another fireball at that point. But he didn't. It appeared both he and the sea of civilians were safe in that regard.

Three cheers for perseverance, he thought. Or as Jarvis would have put it, being too stupid to know when you're overmatched.

Rocketing skyward, Stark strove for another bird's-eye view of the battlefield. After all, the confrontation he had broken up was just one among many.

But on every parallel strip of green, a similar retreat was taking place. Whoever was in charge of the uniformed men seemed to have recalled

them all at once, much to Stark's relief

After all, his power wasn't unlimited. Back in his own time, he could have called for a boost via a Stark satellite. In this era, he had to rely strictly on his batteries.

All right, he thought, now what?

He needed to get his bearings, to gain some understanding of this world so he could formulate his next move. And he didn't expect to get any help from the blue suits - even if he could get them to halt their retreat long enough to talk to them.

That left him but one alternative. Looping around into a slow descent, Stark headed for the mass of civilians.

They pointed to him as he approached them, their eyes fixed on him. Not just those he had seen exchanging energy fire with the enemy, but older people and children as well.

Stark smiled to himself behind his mask. This was the sort of image he'd dreamed about when he first began working on his armor. People pointing

up at him in admiration and gratitude. A little icing on the cake of his legacy.

As he came closer to the civilians, they appeared to clear a space for him. Again, it was as he had pictured it, back in the days when he was brainstorming the Iron Man technology in an icebox of an abandoned Tibetan monastery.

Gradually cutting power to the thrusters in his boots, Stark eased himself to the ground. Then he waited for a reaction.

A round of applause would have been nice. Or a cheer, like the one he had received at the company picnic the year before. Or just a thank-you, like the one the woman had given him earlier.

But he heard nothing of the sort. Instead, a couple of civilians pointed their weapons in his direction.

Stark held his hands up to show he meant them no harm. It was an empty gesture, considering his arsenal was built into his armor, but there was no way these people could have known that.

A woman with a shock of short, dark hair came forward, an energy rifle cradled in her arms. She would have been pretty except for the jagged scar that ran from her forehead to her jaw.

"That's close enough," she told him in the sharp, choppy accent he had heard earlier.

"Easy," he said, turning on the boardroom charm. "I'm the one who helped you, remember?"

"I know what you did," the woman said. "I just don't know who did it. Or why."

"Simple," Stark told her. "I don't like bullies."

She grunted. "Says the man who won't show us his face."

Can you wreck the timeline by tampering with the future? he wondered. Or only with the past? It was an interesting question. After all, isn't this the past from the perspective of someone years from now?

If he took his mask off and someone recognized him, he might place the timeline in jeopardy. And even if his opinion of the Tomorrow Men had

changed, it still made sense not to screw around with the temporal status quo.

Then again, Stark doubted these people would know Tony Stark from Elvis Presley, especially if the armor hadn't tipped them off already. They didn't look like they had access to a whole lot of historical data.

Besides, he wasn't a big enough fish to have made his mark in a history book. He was just a businessman, a quirky little footnote, no matter how hard he tried to make himself more than that.

Unfastening the locks on either side of his mask, Stark took the thing off. It felt good to feel the air on his skin, and to breathe freely again. Despite the ruins around him, the air was remarkably fresh and sweet smelling.

Which is what happens, he mused, when you eliminate all the heavy industry in the area.

Seeing Stark without his mask, the woman studied his face - so intently, in fact, that he wondered if he had made a mistake after all. Then she made a gesture of dismissal.

"Put it back on, if you want. But stay where we can see you. Baker will want to talk with you."

"Baker," Stark repeated.

"That's right," the woman said. Slinging her energy rifle over her shoulder, she turned her back on him and started picking her way through the crowd.

Stark just stood there for a moment, the object of much scrutiny as people passed him on their way up the street. But no one said anything to him, gratefully or otherwise.

It made him wonder if he had picked the right side after all.

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Stark decided he wouldn't wait for Baker to find him. Instead, he would find Baker, It turned out not to be as easy as he thought.

When he asked for help from the flow of humanity around him, a number of people shrank from him.

Others said a few words, none of them specific enough to be helpful.

Finally, one half-lame old man stopped to talk with him, defying the whispered advice of those with him. "I know Baker," he said hoarsely. "You stay right here. I'll get him."

Then someone said, "No need. He's already here." Stark followed the speaker's gaze and searched the crowd for someone who looked to be in charge. But no one presented himself, at least not right away.

Then a tall man with a long, silver-gray ponytail appeared and moved to confront Stark. He had a look in his eyes that said he wasn't an easy mark.

"You're the stranger," he observed wryly.

"At your service," said Stark.

The man with the ponytail looked him over - first his face and then his armor. "People say you flew through the air like a bird. And blasted the

Scaredy Men with some kind of invisible beams."

Scaredy Men? Interesting name for them.

Stark nodded. "Something like that."

The man's eyes narrowed. "So who are you? What are you?"

Stark didn't think it would be a good idea to tell him. He had already taken a chance by showing his face. Invoking the name of Tony Stark might be pushing his luck too far.

"You mean," he said, "you've never seen a guy in a suit of armor before?"

Baker scowled. "I asked you a question."

"And I can't give you an answer. I hope you'll respect that."

"Or what? You'll turn your weapons on me?"

"I'll do nothing of the sort," said Stark. "Whoever those uniformed people were, they were firing on a child. I won't countenance that."

"You don't know who they are?" asked the man with the ponytail, looking skeptical.

"I'm not from around here," Stark pointed out, "as you've no doubt surmised."

"He talks all fancy-shmancy," said the woman with the scar, moving up beside Baker. "Like the rats.

"The rats?" asked Stark.

"You don't know them either?" Baker asked.

"I'm afraid not," said Stark.

"He's lying," said the woman.

"No," said Baker, "I don't think so." He turned back to Stark. "The rats are the people in the Enclave - the ones with all the food. Enough to support a private army."

Stark looked at him. "So those people firing at you were mercenaries? Hired guns?"

"Hired scum," said the woman. "No different from us except for the fact they've sold out."

"Working for the Enclave," said Baker, "they get food, shelter, clothing. All the things we're missing."

"Except for self-respect," said the woman.

"Why were they after you?" Stark asked.

Baker chuckled. "The rats control a network of privileged places along the lines of the Enclave. They dole out tech information to these places and in return they get supply caravans.

"We've got the brass to believe those supplies should be ours, so we go after them. Sometimes we get them, sometimes we don't. Either way, the rats send the Scaredy Men after us, to make us think twice about doing it again."

"This time," said the woman with the scar, "we got most of the supplies. So they whipped us pretty hard." Her mouth twisted in a parody of a smile. "Or anyway, they tried to."

"So now what?" Baker asked Stark. "Now that you got your history lesson, you planning on going back where you came from?"

"Eventually," Stark replied hopefully. "But not yet. First I'd like to learn more about this Enclave."

"Digger can tell him anything he wants to know", said the woman.

Baker nodded, eyeing his armored benefactor all the while. "That's right, Torricelli, I guess he can."

"Can I speak to him?" asked Stark.

Baker shook his head. "Not a chance in hell. Digger doesn't talk to strangers. He hardly talks to friends."

"I'd like to give it a shot anyway," said Stark.

The man with the ponytail laughed humorlessly. "Yeah, I'll just bet you would."

"So," said Stark, "you're not going to tell me where to find him?"

Baker considered him. "We'll talk some more later. That is, if you're still around."

Stark couldn't imagine where else he would go.

Natasha Romanov wasn't especially surprised by what she found on Allegheny Street.

It wasn't the worst residential block she had ever seen, but it certainly wasn't the best. Though the empty plastic containers along the curb indicated a garbage collection just that morning, the place smelled like some of it had been left behind.

Mmm .. .fragrant, Natasha thought.

Each door on the block had a set of brass numerals nailed to it. She walked along, reading them to herself, until she reached the one she was looking for. Twenty-three. Or rather it would have been, if the three hadn't lost its top nail and swung upside down.

Walking up three brick steps, she noticed that the mailbox was full. But it was too early for the mail carrier to have shown up already, so it must have been the mail from the day before.

Maybe he's away, Natasha thought.

She sure as hell hoped not. She didn't know where else to turn.

Natasha couldn't find a doorbell, so she rapped on the door with her knuckles. No response. But she hadn't come all that way to walk away empty-handed.

She lifted her hand to knock again. But before she could connect, she heard a shuffling sound behind the door. A moment later, it was replaced by a metallic creaking, as of tumblers sliding in a lock that desperately needed oil.

Then the door swung inward, revealing a bleary-eyed, stubble-chinned Henry Pym.

He was wearing jeans, a loose-fitting sweatshirt, and a pair of mismatched socks, all of which looked thoroughly slept in. Most people wouldn't have noticed the disparity between the socks, but Russian spies were trained to notice everything.

"Miss Romanov," said Pym, obviously surprised to see her.

She was about to say, "Call me Natasha." But under the circumstances, she thought better of it.

After all, Pym was a bachelor these days, and she had shown up at his apartment unannounced, and she didn't want him to jump to the wrong conclusion. Especially since she considered him something of a slimeball after what he did to his wife.

"Doctor Pym," Natasha responded, keeping it professional. "Mind if I come in?"

"Not at all," he told her, stepping aside and gesturing for her to enter. "Just don't mind the mess."

It was a mess, all right. There were boxes of stuff everywhere. Manila folders. Compact disks. Science magazines. Photo albums. Also an elaborate terrain of soda cans, empty and half-full bags of chips, fast-food containers, bills, aspirin bottles, video cassettes, and newspaper clippings.

Much of it was covered with dust. So whatever was there had been there for a while.

But then, people's living conditions often mirrored their frame of mind. And after Pym's fall from grace at the Triskelion, his frame of mind had to

be a dismal one.

Natasha walked past her host and sat down on the couch, next to a stack of National Geographies that had the decency to topple the other way. Running his fingers through his thick, unkempt shock of dirty-blond hair, Pym deposited himself on an overstuffed chair.

Then he said, "So what brings you out this way?"

"I have a problem," she said, "one that's beyond my skill to address. But I have a feeling it's not beyond yours."

"What is it?" he asked, leaning forward in his chair.

"First off, you need to know that Tony Stark has disappeared. He was on his way to the Tiber place in the Caucasus when he went incommunicado and the black box in his armor stopped transmitting."

"That's terrible," said Pym.

"But if I'm right," Natasha continued, "it wasn't an accident that he disappeared. It's the work of

the Tomorrow Men."

The scientist looked at her. "What makes you say that?"

"I've always found solace in food," she said. "I know you wouldn't think that to look at me, but it's true. So as I came to grips with our friend's disappearance, it was inevitable that I would wind up in the mess hall.

"It happened that the Tomorrow Men were there too, along with their guards. Seeing me, Weyland took the opportunity to express his condolences about Stark. I nodded or something, too lost in my thoughts to put much effort into a response.

"But thanks to one of the reflective strips in the back of a booth, I was able to watch Weyland return to his table. As he sat down, unaware that I could see him, he exchanged a look with Chadaputra.

"I was a spy, as you know. I'm trained to decipher people's expressions. The look Weyland exchanged with Chadaputra wasn't one of sympathy. It was the kind people exchange when they're up to no good. When they're concealing

something.

"Until that moment, it wouldn't have occurred to me to suspect the Tomorrow Men had a hand in Stark's disappearance. But now I'm certain of it."

*"What could they have done?" Pym asked.
"Haven't they been under lock and key?"*

"They have been," she confirmed. "But they're from the future. Who knows what they can do? At the very least, I believe, they've tampered with the data we received from Stark's black box."

"Which is why I came to you," she told the scientist. "You're the communications expert. I'm hoping you can find the original data, or at least confirm the fact that it's been modified, without attracting the Tomorrow Men's attention."

Pym's brow furrowed. "Have you told Fury about this?"

She shook her head. "Neither him nor any of my other colleagues. If the Tomorrow Men can erase communications logs from their cell, they can eavesdrop on conversations. That's the other reason I'm here. They may be able to bug the

Triskelion, but I doubt they can hear us talking here in Chicago."

"So what do you say?" Natasha asked.

Pym stared past her for a moment at something only he could see. Then he focused again and said, "I can help. But I don't have access to the Triskelion anymore."

"Leave that to me," said Natasha. "Back in my espionage days, I got into the White House as a cleaning woman - twice. I think I can get you into our little top-security country club."

The sun was on its way down before Baker's people stopped moving through the slots between the ruins, and set up camp beside a meandering creek.

Gathering wood, which seemed plentiful in the overgrown rubble if one knew where to look, they set up tripods and took out pots that were no larger than a big man's fist. Then they filled the pots with water from the creek, got their fires going, and threw in pieces of food they had been

carrying.

Stew, Stark thought.

It had been a long time since he ate anything that went by that description. Maybe since college. But things were different back then. He was cooking for himself, trying to keep body and soul together until he could file his first patent.

Moving closer to one of the fires, he watched a woman with braided blond hair stir the contents of her pot with a stick. He doubted there was anything fancy in the mix. Roots, wild scallions, nuts, that sort of thing. Whatever she had been able to scavenge.

Still, Stark's stomach growled at the smell, reminding him how long it had been since he put anything in it. Not even the olive from a martini, he mused.

Back in his own time, it wasn't unusual for him to miss a meal because he was too busy. But he always knew that he would eat sometime soon, and eat well.

In this era, Stark didn't have the same luxury.

As if the woman had eyes in the back of her head, she turned and looked at him. She had a kind and not unattractive face, though it clearly wasn't a happy one.

"The stranger," she said, smiling a little. "The one who saved us from the Scaredy Men."

"Guilty as charged," Stark said.

"Care for some?" the woman asked him, gesturing to the pot with a red, calloused hand.

Surprised, he nodded. "In fact, I would. If there's enough to go around."

"There is," she assured him.

It felt awkward for Stark to sit down, his armor tightening around his middle and the backs of his knees. But then, he hadn't designed it with a whole lot of sitting in mind.

In any case, he settled onto a chunk of rock and placed his mask on the ground beside him. Then he watched his hostess dip into the stew with a charred iron ladle and deposit a dollop on a chipped ceramic plate.

"There you are," she said.

Now that Stark was able to get a look at the stuff, it didn't seem so appetizing after all. But he had to eat something. And besides, he didn't want to offend his benefactor.

"I'm grateful," he told her.

"Don't mention it," she said.

For a while, they sat there in companionable silence. Just eating. It was a novel experience for Stark, who was accustomed to always either entertaining at dinner or being entertained.

Abruptly, the woman spoke up. "My name's Patricia."

"Michael," he replied warmly, using his middle name. "A pleasure to meet you. And thanks again for being so charitable." .

"You're lucky," the woman told him. "I don't always have enough to share. How is it?"

"Very good," he said, lying.

The woman tried to smile again, though she was clearly out of practice. "I'm glad you like it."

Again, silence. And under its influence, Stark realized how tired he was. It had been a long day.

A couple of centuries long.

"Does it get hot in there?" Patricia asked, lifting her chin to indicate his armor.

Stark shook his head. "Not really. It's got a temperature control system. If I didn't feel the breeze on my face, I wouldn't have any idea what the ambient, temperature is."

"Where did you get something like that?"

"I made it," he said. "With a lot of help."

"Things must be different where you come from."

Stark nodded. "They are."

More silence. Like a soft, comfortable blanket.

'You're a good-looking man," Patricia observed.

It took Stark a moment to recover from the compliment. "It's the mask, my dear. Does wonders for my complexion."

"Where you come from," she asked, "is there anybody waiting for you to come back? A woman, I mean?"

He knew exactly what she meant. From force of habit, he was about to reply in the negative. Then he remembered...

"There is, actually."

A shadow of disappointment crossed Patricia's face. "She's a fortunate woman."

Well, he thought, there was the incident in the men's room. But he doubted that Natasha would call herself "fortunate" on the basis of that alone.

"Do you have... anyone?" he asked.

The woman shrugged. "I used to. Tom was his name. He got killed a year ago assaulting an Enclave caravan."

"I'm sorry," said Stark

She nodded. "Me, too. But lots of us have lost our mates. That's just the way it is."

But not the way it's supposed to be, he reflected. It's more than two hundred years in the future. You're supposed to be living in a paradise. A Utopia.

That was what all his work had been about. That was why he had rushed from meeting to meeting, never stopping to take a breath, because he didn't want to let a single moment go by unused.

So the future would be better. He looked around. Not so it would be like this.

"You all right?" Patricia asked.

"Yes," he said. "Why?"

"You just got this look in your eye... I don't know. Like you wanted to hit somebody or something."

Stark laughed. "Did I?"

He didn't get angry very often. Maybe because I'm too full of booze, he conceded.

But what he had seen of this century made him very angry - at the people who had crushed his dream, replacing it with their own. And at himself, for allowing it to happen.

"I get a little angry myself sometimes," said Patricia. "When I think about the Enclave and everything they've got in there, and how little we have out here."

Stark nodded. "It's a shame."

If he ever managed to return to his proper time, he would do his best to set things right. But in the meantime, he had to embrace the Enclave the way a drowning man might embrace a life preserver - because it was his only shot at getting home.

16

Stark heard a tapping sound. And it wouldn't stop.

Where the devil is it coming from? he asked himself Somewhere not too far away...

Then he realized something was hitting him on the top of his helmet, which was locked onto his head again. Instinctively, he reached for the offending party - and closed the fingers of his gauntlet on it.

Twisting his head around, he eyed what he had caught. It was a boy, perhaps six or seven years old. And he had a flat piece of rubble in his hand.

"Leggo!" the kid growled, struggling to free himself.

Stark released him and he went scurrying away in a hurry. Obviously, the boy hadn't expected the man-shaped pile of metal he had discovered to wake up.

Propping himself up on an elbow, Stark looked around. Though he could see Patricia's pot hanging over a pile of dead ashes, the woman herself was nowhere to be seen.

But most everybody else in the encampment was either eating or preparing something to eat. It

made him wish he were doing the same.

Where's Jarvis when I need him?

Unfortunately, his butler had been dead for centuries, along with every other soul Stark had ever met. It was a sobering thought, to say the least.

And speaking of sobering...

It felt funny not to have a martini in his hands, or at least to be able to look forward to one. But he doubted martinis were the beverage of choice among these people.

It wasn't the alcohol Stark missed, strangely enough. It was the distraction it afforded him, the opportunity to focus on something other than his medical problem.

He didn't want to be a sad, worried man waiting for the end. Whatever time he had left on Earth, he wanted to spend as well and as productively as he could... regardless of what era he spent it in.

Stark looked at the ragged mass of humanity

around him. If anyone needed an Iron Man, these people did.

He knew there was a rational reason the time portal had sent him to New York instead of someplace else - some simple trick of calibration. And he had never been what one might call a religious man. However, it certainly seemed Providence had plunked him down where he could do the most good.

If he didn't get back to his own time, and the odds were pretty good in that regard, this one certainly posed its share of challenges. Enough to keep him busy for a lifetime, whatever span of months and days that might represent.

Hell, he mused, savoring the irony, my doctors said I wasn't assured of seeing tomorrow. And here I am a hundred thousand tomorrows later, still kicking.

It was funny, in a grim way. Stark wished there was someone with whom he could share the joke.

As he thought that, he heard voices rise suddenly in anger. Turning in that direction, he saw a

crowd standing around the corner of a ruined edifice.

A second time, the voices cut through the morning air. But Stark still couldn't make out what they were angry about.

His curiosity aroused, he moved across the encampment, careful not to step on anything or anyone. Finally, he reached the crowd and peered past it.

What he saw inside the ruins were Baker and five other people, two of them women, sitting on loose chunks of masonry. They weren't shouting anymore, but they looked as if they might reprise that behavior at any moment.

With no breakfast appointments on his schedule, Stark removed his helmet and tucked it under his arm. Then he turned to the bony-faced man beside him and asked, "What's going on?"

"The council's talking with the people who live around here," came the answer.

"What about?" Stark wondered.

"When you enter someone else's territory, it's customary to meet with their leaders. Otherwise, it can get bloody."

So, Stark thought, it's not just the Enclave Baker has to worry about. It's other groups like his own.

But then, as he had seen, resources were rather scarce. If people weren't inclined to share within their group, they certainly weren't going to share with strangers.

"What do you think will happen?" Stark asked.

He had come to like Baker despite his curmudgeonly behavior, and Patricia as well. He had even begun to think of himself as a member of their community.

But the people who lived there weren't from the Enclave. They weren't tyrants. They were just looking out for themselves, which they had every right to do.

So if the situation did get bloody, Stark couldn't fight on his friends' behalf. The only thing he could do, in good conscience, was try to defuse

hostilities.

He hoped Baker knew that.

"I don't know," said the bony-faced man. "But they've been talking for a long time. There must be some complications."

"What kind?" Stark asked.

"Every meeting is different," the man noted. "It could be anything."

Anything? Stark echoed inwardly. He wished he had the slightest idea what possibilities fell into that category.

Back in his own time, Stark had dickered with just about every kind of executive officer and dignitary there was, from Tokyo to Tierra del Fuego. But in every instance, he had known what to expect.

Part of that was the emphasis he placed on preparation. The other part was his knack for looking across the polished mahogany table of a company's boardroom and figuring out the other players' agendas.

But that was only possible because he knew what their agendas might be. They might, for instance, be willing to sell a company for less than market value in order to invest the capital in an opportunity elsewhere. They might be looking for a write-off to offset an unexpectedly healthy profit on their balance sheet. Or they might be asking too much for a property because they really didn't want to get rid of it in the first place.

This era, on the other hand, involved quids and pro quos he had probably never considered before. And until he could, he would feel like a fish out of water.

Suddenly, Baker shot to his feet, as did a couple of the men facing him. Then, with markedly less enthusiasm, the other men in the building stood up as well.

Faces turned dark with anger. Index fingers jabbed the air. Voices became snarls.

Is this absolutely necessary? Stark thought.

For a moment, it looked as if it would come to blows. Then the men confronting Baker spat on

the floor and moved off But it was clear they weren't happy about it.

Baker's side didn't look happy either. However, they let the others go without another word.

With the scrap over, Stark saw Baker and his compatriots leave the building. The crowd seemed to approve of what had transpired, judging by their comments.

Stark moved to join the man with the silver ponytail, who acknowledged him only with a glance. "It looked heated in there," Stark observed.

"They didn't like the idea of our being here. They're the kind that doesn't want to invite trouble, and they know we're the ones who've got the Enclave mad at us."

"So how did you resolve the situation?"

"They're moving. And we're staying."

Stark looked around. "Seems there would be plenty of room here for both of you."

"Seems that way," said Baker.

Something in his voice told Stark it wasn't Baker's reputation that had sent the locals packing. "They don't want to be associated with me, do they?"

The man with the ponytail shook his head. "In that armor, you're easy to spot. And there are other people in the employ of the Enclave besides those who wear those uniforms."

"Spies, you mean."

"All over," said Baker, his mouth twisting with contempt. "When we catch them, we kill them. But we don't often catch them."

Stark frowned. "What would happen if they told the Enclave about me?"

"I don't know. But if I were the locals, I wouldn't stick around to find out."

"I don't want anyone hurt on my account."

"Too late," said Baker. "They know you helped us. As far as they're concerned, that makes you one of us."

"And as far as you're concerned?"

Baker shrugged. "For all I know, you're one of those spies."

Stark chuckled. "Yes, that's likely. Nothing like a suit of armor to help one blend in with the crowd."

"Maybe not. But if you were going to gain our confidence, saving our hides would be a good way to do it. Then, after we've come to trust you, you could lead us into an Enclave trap."

"You've seen what my armor can do," said Stark. "If it had been my intention to incapacitate you, I wouldn't have resorted to the trap approach. I would simply have attempted it on my own."

"So, if you haven't done that," said Baker, "why don't I trust you? That's what you want to know, right?"

"That's correct."

"Because," said Baker, "the enemy has its own way of looking at things. I have enough trouble planning my own strategies. You want me to plan

the Enclave's too?"

"You know what I want," Stark told him. "To speak with Digger."

"Tell me something. Why do you want to know about the Enclave so badly?"

"If I gave you an answer, you wouldn't believe it."

"Try me," said Baker.

Stark considered doing so - but only for a moment. In the end, the timeline was too serious a concern.

"I can't," he said finally. "But I assure you, it's not just me I'm looking out for. If I accomplish what I need to, your people will benefit as well."

"And I can trust you on that account?"

"You can," said Stark.

Baker laughed. "You really aren't from around here." He made a gesture with his arm that included everything around them. "Someone sells

out to the Enclave every other day. That doesn't make for a whole lot of trust."

"You have to trust somebody," said Stark.

"I do. I trust people like Torricelli, who fight alongside me month in and month out." A glance. "Who do you trust?"

The question caught Stark off-guard. Who indeed?

"I have comrades," he said. "People who've proven their loyalty over the years." Hogan, for instance. And Jarvis.

"But no one you've met recently," Baker echoed.

"Actually," said Stark, thinking of Fury and the Ultimates, "I have a few new comrades. And I trust them as well."

"The same way you trust the old ones?"

Stark mulled it over for a moment. "Maybe not," he conceded. "But it's close."

"Then you're lucky," said Baker.

But he didn't tell Stark where to find Digger.

Bruce Banner didn't get it.

It wasn't that he minded seeing Henry Pym again. After all, when one was penned up in an airtight holding unit, any company was better than no company at all.

But if Pym was there to check Banner's blood work-ups, as he had indicated, what was he doing accessing communications logs? Banner could see through his transparent wall what his fellow scientist was looking at, and the graphic Pym had called up was definitely not a blood work-up.

Was it possible the guy had just made a mistake? Banner didn't think so. Pym had had his share of personal problems lately, but he was too bright a guy to be confusing two such different kinds of files.

So what was going on? And should I say something to Pym about it? Banner wondered. Or maybe speak to Fury?

After all, the general would want to know if

something fishy was happening. And it wouldn't hurt to remind him how valuable Banner could be, considering his dependence on Fury's goodwill.

But there was another possibility. Pym might have been down there to help Fury, albeit in a low-profile kind of way. And if Banner attracted attention to the fact, it might tick Fury off.

Which would be a bad thing, Banner reflected. A very bad thing.

So in the end, he decided to keep his mouth shut and let Pym go about his business, no matter what it was. Because guys who lived in glass cages weren't just ill-advised to throw stones.

They were ill-advised to get involved in pretty much anything.

Stark heard a tapping and - tired as he was - smiled to himself. The kid again, he thought.

"All right," he said, without opening his eyes. "No need to keep knocking. I assure you, I'm still in here."

But the kid didn't stop.

"You do hear me, don't you?" Stark asked. "This armor's occupied."

And still the kid rapped on his helmet.

"And now it's getting a little tedious," said Stark, doing his best not to lose his patience with the boy.

But the youngster persisted. It sounded like a woodpecker had taken a liking to Stark's favorite brand of alloy;

By that time, Stark was a tad annoyed. Opening his eyes, he saw through his optical filters that it was still night. Still dark enough for the stars to be visible in the sky.

He wondered why the boy was up at this hour. Had he lain awake hoping to have a better chance at the armor, thinking Stark would remove it in order to sleep?

He began selecting the words he would use to make the kid leave him alone. It was hard enough being a stranger in a strange land without being a sleepy stranger as well.

Finally, his choice of phraseology firmly in mind, Stark rolled over to address the boy - and saw at a glance why the youngster had been so persistent.

A battalion of perhaps fifty uniformed guards was standing at the edge of Baker's camp, not a hundred yards from Stark's location. And they all had rifles in their hands.

No one else in the encampment seemed to have noticed the intruders. They were sleeping too deeply to notice anything.

Powering up his armor's tactical systems, Stark turned to the boy and whispered, "Come here." Then he tucked the child into a crevice formed by two large pieces of broken concrete, all the while keeping an eye on the - what had Baker called them?

Scaredy Men.

There were too many of them to take out all at once. But if he didn't get them in a single swoop, the ones he missed would slaughter Baker's people as they slept

And sounding an alarm wouldn't help. By the time everyone realized what was happening, the soldiers would have skewered them all on their energy beams.

How in blazes did they get here without alerting Baker's sentries? Stark wondered.

Then he saw a handful of guards blink into existence beside the others, and he remembered - the Tomorrow Men had used personal teleportation devices to get to Calibana. If these soldiers had the same technology working for them, they could have materialized anywhere they wanted without making a sound.

But why attack this way, when their modus operandi in the past had been to approach Baker's people on foot? What had happened to make them change their tactics?

As Stark supplied the answer, a chill climbed his spine. Ifs because of me.

The Enclave wasn't used to its guards getting their butts kicked. So it was stepping up its level of retaliation, showing Baker's people they couldn't do that without paying a price.

And maybe looking for the metal-encased idiot who had done most of the butt-kicking, to teach him a really special lesson. Though that was hardly Stark's first concern.

He bit his lip. Pietro would have been fast enough to get to the intruders and ruin their aim. Thor could have brought the lightning down on them with his hammer.

But what can I do? Stark asked himself.

The wind swept over him, flattening the weeds around him and stippling his armor with tiny pieces of crushed concrete. One of the guards got some of it in his eye, and used a knuckle to rub it.

But it wasn't enough to keep him from aiming his weapon at a sleeping figure. Or listening for the order that would have him release a gout of killing force.

Suddenly, Stark smiled to himself Unless ...

Using the controls in his right gauntlet, he turned up the power in his pulse-emitters to maximum. Then he aimed his palms at a pile of rubble just

this side of the soldiers.

This had better work, Stark told himself - and unleashed a pair of blasts powerful enough to pulverize a city sidewalk.

A layer of rubble was instantly crushed into dust - a cloud of it that swept over the Scaredy Men, obscuring them from him. But at the same time, it hid Baker's people from the Scaredy Men.

Which was exactly what Stark had hoped it would do.

It also started the guards coughing, which woke up their targets. And once the rabble was awake, its instincts took over. Hands groped for rifles. Children scampered for cover.

With the attack exposed, Stark was able to put his efforts into striking back. It didn't matter that he couldn't see much of the guards. He could still fire into the dust cloud. As closely packed as his adversaries were, he seemed bound to hit someone.

With each high-powered pulse emission, he heard a grunt or a curse or a cry of pain - evidence that

his attacks were doing some damage. Keep it up, he told himself.

Suddenly, a half-dozen violet energy beams erupted at Stark from the depths of the cloud. None of them hit him, but a couple came close.

Looks like they've zeroed in on me, he thought.

But that wasn't a bad thing. If they were firing at him, they weren't firing at anyone else.

Then it wasn't just Stark's pulse emissions that were harassing the guards. There were energy beams pounding them as well. Baker's people were letting them know how they felt about midnight raids.

Between the pulse emissions, the beams, and the strength of the wind, the dust cloud was ripped apart. But as the air cleared, it was still impossible to make out any of the guards.

And Stark knew why. They were gone. All of them. As if they had never been there in the first place.

Flying over the spot, he confirmed it. The only

thing left of the Scaredy Men was the blood they had lost.

Baker's people were shaken by the experience. Men and women were cursing the Enclave at the tops of their lungs. Children were crying, wide-eyed with apprehension.

But it could have been worse. A lot worse.

17

"Hey, Armor Man!" someone yelled in the darkness.

Stark turned and saw it was Baker calling to him, moving through his sea of followers. And as usual, Torricelli was at Baker's side, looking like she had eaten something rancid.

"You seem to be in good health," Stark observed. He glanced at Torricelli. "Both of you."

"It was you who kicked up that cloud of dust,"

the man with the ponytail said, "wasn't it?"

"It was," said Stark.

Baker looked at him for a moment, as if he were trying to see through the metal mask to the man behind it. "If not for you," he said, "we would've been dog meat."

"It's hard to argue with that," Stark conceded.

Baker glanced at Torricelli. "You see? I told you we were wrong about him."

The woman didn't say anything in response. She just made a sound of disgust and walked away.

Baker turned to Stark. "Ybu should be honored. That's as close as she comes to complimenting anyone."

Stark chuckled in his mask. "If she's not careful, she's going to give me a swelled head."

Baker smiled a weary smile. "That's one danger we won't have to worry about."

"So," said Stark, taking advantage of the

situation, "can I speak with Digger now?"

Baker eyed him. "Will you take off as soon as you do? And leave us to the mercy of the bastards in the Enclave?"

"Not right away," Stark told him. "But eventually. As I said, I'm not from around here."

Baker considered him for a moment. Then he said, "I'll tell you how to find Digger in the morning. I just hope for your sake he's in one of his more lucid moments. He drinks a bit."

Stark had to smile at the irony. "It's all right. I've been known to drink a bit myself."

Natasha had never been the patient sort.

In her work as a spy, she had often been forced to bide her time. But it had never been easy for her. And now, as she waited to hear from Henry Pym in her apartment in Greenwich Village, it was even harder.

Pym had said he would call her at five o'clock with a progress report. But it was five forty-five already, and Natasha still hadn't heard from him.

It was possible that he had become too engrossed in his work to realize what time it was. Having seen his apartment, she understood that the real world could be an inconvenience for him, an annoying and apparently irrelevant set of restrictions.

But it was also possible that he had run into trouble, either with Fury or with the Tomorrow Men. And the longer he snooped around in the Triskelion, the greater the likelihood such trouble would rear its head.

Finally, Natasha couldn't stand it anymore. She crossed the room and reached for the phone. But before she could wrap her fingers around it, it rang.

Picking it up, she said, "Hello?"

"It's Hank," said the voice on the other end.

He sounded even more tired than when he answered his door the day before. But then, he wasn't the type to let sleep get in the way of his work.

"Anything?" she asked.

"Looks like you were right," Pym told her.

"Someone tampered with the data."

I knew it, Natasha thought. "Were you able to get any of it back?"

"Just bits and pieces. But in sufficient quantity to tell us what we need to know. From all indications, Stark was headed for the mountain, all right. And it appears he made it."

Then something happened to him after he got there. And in some way, the Tomorrow Men were responsible for it.

"You've been a huge help," Natasha told the scientist. "I can't thank you enough."

"There's one other thing," he said.

She looked at the phone. "Yes?"

"I know I'm not on the A team anymore, but I can still be a valuable guy in a fight. And from the look of things, you may be in a little over your head."

"It's kind of you to offer," said Natasha. "But

where I'm going, I expect my talents will come in handier than yours."

"Suit yourself," said Pym. "If you change your mind, you know where to find me."

She got the feeling he wasn't just talking about fighting bad guys anymore. The observation made her skin crawl.

"I do," she said. "And thanks."

"Hey," said Pym, "what are mad scientists for?"

Tony Stark walked through an Upper East Side that looked nothing like the stately, soaring environs he knew so well.

There wasn't a single tall building left standing. Not even one. In their place stood hillock after shaggy green hillock, all of them at their cores just enormous piles of debris.

For some reason, the smaller buildings seemed to have had an easier time of it. But they too had suffered cracked fagades and broken windows and missing doors.

Remarkably, a number of lampposts had survived, even if they looked different from the ones Stark had known - not simply utilitarian, but dark and sinuous like rearing serpents. The product, no doubt, of a more advanced era than his own. And many of those lampposts still bore the Gothic-style street signs that had been affixed to them.

In keeping with his surroundings, Stark didn't look the same either. He was wearing a long, hooded coat that Baker had given him, meant for a man much larger than he was. But then, it had to be big to conceal the contours of his armor.

Knowing how little Baker's people had, Stark would normally have felt badly about taking a coat from one of them. However, its previous owner didn't need it any longer, as he had perished in the first retaliatory strike on which Stark had intruded.

Besides, Stark reflected soberly, the coat is being used for a good cause.

He allowed himself one stop en route to his destination, at the intersection of Lenox and 112th Street. After all, Uptown Presbyterian had been located on Lenox between 112th and 113th.

But there was no evidence of it anymore. The medical center Stark had bought and renovated for the sake of the community was gone, replaced by a mountain of overgrown rubble.

He sighed. He had been so proud of that acquisition. He'd had such high hopes for it.

Especially the children's wing. He wondered if Miles Mortimer had ever put up the money they had talked about, and if he had ever gotten his big neon sign.

Stark hoped so. The hospital might be gone now, but it could have helped a great many people while it was standing. Thousands of them. Maybe tens of thousands.

They were long dead and buried, along with the New York City they had known. But while they were alive, they might have had something good to say about Uptown Presbyterian. Stark found some comfort in that thought.

As he was starting to attract stares, he moved on. Seven blocks later, he came to one of the intersections without a lamppost, so he had to depend on the landmarks described to him.

A corner with a section of caved-in sidewalk. A remarkably intact brick wall with the mural of a bountiful garden on it. A maple tree growing crookedly out of a sewer grate.

Go right here, he thought.

Unlike the other weed-choked streets he had seen, the one that stretched that way looked deserted. If there were people living in its frail, ramshackle buildings, they were doing a damned fine job of hiding themselves.

Still, he continued in that direction, in accordance with Baker's instructions. Finally, he came to a spot where a building's brick facade had cracked away, revealing the light-colored mortar beneath. Whether by accident or design, the exposed patch resembled a woman's high-heeled boot.

Turning to look across the street, Stark saw a door. It was one of the few on the block still intact, much less hanging straight on its hinges.

This is the place, he thought.

When he crossed the street and turned the

doorknob, he discovered that the place was unlocked - just as he had been told it would be. Pushing the door open, he found himself in a rubble-strewn foyer. Beyond it were the flimsy remains of a wooden stairway, which led to a higher floor.

Stark didn't want that option, according to Baker. He wanted to go through the door behind the stairway and find another stair, which he did. This set of steps was cruder but better preserved, and it led down instead of up.

Moments later, he found himself descending into a dimly lit basement. When he got to the bottom step, he looked around. The place was a jumble of plastic jugs and metal cans, some opened, some unopened. There were blankets as well, piled haphazardly against a wall, not far from an old, stained mattress.

Stark almost missed the basement's only occupant, mistaking him for another pile of blankets. A second look showed him a stringy-haired figure in a long, threadbare coat, with a stubbly chin and a strangely hollow look to his eyes.

He's blind, Stark realized.

"Digger?" he ventured.

"That's me," came the response, in a voice as threadbare as the coat. "And who the hell might you be?"

"Someone in need of information. Baker sent me."

"Don't know any Baker."

"He told me you'd say that."

Digger didn't voice any other objections. Apparently, Stark thought, I've convinced him I'm all right.

"I'm thirsty," Digger said suddenly.

Fortunately, Stark was prepared. He handed Digger the flask Baker had loaned him and said, "This ought to help."

The stuff in the flask was watered down. After all, Stark wanted Digger to be in control of his faculties for the duration of their conversation. Still, Digger seemed to be satisfied with the

quality of his libation. Putting the flask to his lips, he poured its contents down his throat all at once.

Salud, Stark thought.

Wiping his mouth with his sleeve, Digger eyed his visitor - or at least seemed to. "There's something different about you. The scrape of your boots... definitely something different."

"I'm wearing armor," said Stark. Then he dragged out the line he had given the others: "I'm not from around here."

"I guess not," said Digger. "No one around here has an accent like that." A pause. "Where did you get the armor?"

"Where I come from," he said, "there's lots of it." A half-dozen suits could qualify as lots, I suppose.

Digger looked like he would continue to inquire about the armor. Instead, he asked, "What do you want to know?"

Everything, Stark thought. "Tell me about the

Enclave."

Digger shrugged. "There's not much to tell. They have everything. We have nothing. Sometimes we try to take what they have. They beat us up and try to take it back." He pointed to his eyes. "One time, they took these. Shot me square in the face with an energy gun. Could've been worse, though. Guys have died from shots like that one."

"I imagine so," said Stark.

Digger frowned. "That's it. Thanks for the drink" Flipping his visitor the flask, he leaned back into the shadows.

Stark had haggled with his share of tough negotiators. It seemed Digger was cut from the same cloth. "I was told you knew more about the Enclave than anyone. Is there something else you need to jog your memory?"

Digger grunted. "I'm still thirsty. But not for that watered-down swill in the flask. I'm thirsty the way you're thirsty. Thirsty for knowledge."

"You want to know about me before you discuss the Enclave. Is that it?"

"Very perceptive," said the blind man.

Stark bit his lip. He desperately wanted what Digger could give him. But he wouldn't screw up the timeline to get it.

"You see," said Digger, thinking out loud, "the only place I know of that could armor a man is the Enclave. But if you were one of their Scaredy Men, you wouldn't be asking about them - would you? So there must be another place like the Enclave somewhere. Maybe farther down the coast. The question is...what are you doing here? Checking out the competition, maybe in preparation for a little empire-building? Or did you come to help us against our oppressor?"

Before Stark could respond, Digger laughed. It was an ugly sound, and it echoed in the confines of the basement.

"Right," said the blind man. "Like that'll happen."

"Look," said Stark, choosing his words carefully, "I didn't come to your part of the world with the intention of helping you. But now that I'm here, I will. All I ask is that you give me an understanding of the Enclave. But I can't tell you

where I'm from or how I got here. I've sworn to keep my mouth shut in that regard, and I'm not a man who goes back on his word."

Digger tilted his head like a dog. "Even if it means you walk out of here no smarter than when you walked in?"

"Even then," said Stark.

"Then go," said the blind man.

Stark thought about staying and arguing his case. However, he had a feeling he wouldn't get anywhere. Besides, there had to be someone else who knew about the Enclave. Somewhere.

Turning, he headed for the stairs and the door at the top of it. But before he could reach it, Digger said, "Wait."

Stark looked back over his shoulder. "Yes?"

"You said you were going to help us. In what way?"

"That depends," said Stark, "on what I learn about the Enclave."

Digger hesitated for a moment. Then he said, "All right. Sit down."

Stark found a wooden crate. Again, he wished he had designed his armor with an eye to sitting.

"The Enclave," said Digger, "has been around for a long time. A hundred and fifty years, at least. It started out as a housing development for rich people - what they used to call a gated community back then - with a private security force.

"Then things fell apart in the world. Nobody knows exactly why or how. But while the rest of us fought over what little food was left, the bastards in the Enclave got everything they needed."

"So it's just housing inside the Enclave?"

Digger shook his head. "It was, in the beginning. Then they moved their technology inside as well, because it wasn't safe for them to keep it anywhere else. The rats generate their own power, store their own food, make most everything they need. What few things they can't make, they bring in from other places. And their

Scaredy Men help them keep it for themselves."

"Who's in charge of the place?" Stark asked.

"Somebody named Stringfellow. Weirdest-looking guy I ever saw, but the people in the Enclave seemed to respect him. His lieutenant, the one who oversees the Scaredy Men, is Weyland. He's the one I'd - "

"Weyland," Stark repeated, interrupting Digger's description.

"Uh huh. You've heard of him?"

"You could say that."

It was starting to come together in Stark's brain. The Tomorrow Men hadn't lied when they said the world of the future was full of tyranny. They had only neglected to say they were part of it.

"Have you ever heard of the Enclave doing something crazy with its technology?" he asked Digger. "Say, trying to send people back and forth through time?"

The blind man looked surprised. "In fact, I have.

But I thought it was a joke." His features screwed into a knot. "Sounds like you know more about the rats than you let on."

"Not really," said Stark. "Just that one thing."

"And why are you interested in that one thing?"

"Don't ask," said Stark, "and I won't have to lie to you."

Digger chuckled - something he obviously didn't do very often. "You've got me going now, armor man. Don't tell me you want to see the future. It's not likely to be any better than what we've got now. Who knows, it may be worse."

That was what Stark was fighting to prevent. "If you wanted to get into the Enclave," he said, "how would you go about it?"

"There's no easy way in," Digger warned him. "Whatever you tried, you'd probably be dead before long."

"But there must be one approach that's a little more promising than the others," Stark insisted.

Digger seemed to ponder the question. "Well," he said finally, "if I was willing to throw my life away on a fool's chance, there's one thing I'd be tempted to try." And he told Stark what it was.

Stark looked at him with even greater respect. "How would I go about getting such a device?"

His host made a sound of disgust. "You can get one right here. I've got a couple of them."

Remarkable, Stark thought. "If I may be so bold, how did you get your hands on them?"

Digger didn't answer right away, and Stark began to wonder if he had offended his informant. Then the blind man spoke up, a sharper edge to his voice.

"It may be," he said, "that I was a Scaredy Man myself for a while, before I came to my senses."

Then he leaned way over to his left, rummaged under some blankets, and came up with the thing his visitor needed. "Here it is," he said, holding it out in his hand.

"Thanks," Stark said as he accepted it.

"It'll only get you in," he said. "After that, you're on your own."

Stark nodded. "I understand."

"What about that help you were going to give us?" asked Digger. "I hope you were planning on doing that before you get yourself vaporized."

"Just slightly," said Stark

"Don't forget."

"I've got a good memory," Stark assured the blind man.

It was true. He remembered the twenty-first century as if it were only yesterday.

18

It was getting dark by the time Stark found Baker in his people's encampment. As usual, Torricelli was with him.

Judging from her expression, he still wasn't high on her holiday list. "You again," she spat.

"Thank you," Stark told her, smiling his warmest smile. "It's nice to see you as well."

"Did Digger tell you what you wanted to know?"

"He did," said Stark. "But to get inside the Enclave, I'll need help - the kind only you can give me."

"What did you have in mind?" Baker asked.

"A distraction. And while you keep the Scaredy Men occupied, I'll sneak inside."

"Like hell," said Torricelli. "We're not going to get ourselves killed for a guy we don't even know."

"He helped us," said Baker.

"It was easy," she countered. "He's wearing that armor. If I was tucked into something like that, I'd go helping people too."

"If all goes according to plan," said Stark, "none

of your people have to get hurt."

"If" she echoed.

Baker frowned. "You're asking a lot."

Stark nodded. "I know."

The man with the ponytail regarded him for what seemed like an eternity. Then he said, "We'll do what we can."

Torricelli unleashed a series of curses. "We're just gonna get ourselves killed."

"It'll happen eventually," Baker said. "Might as well make it count."

"Thank you," said Stark.

"Don't mention it," Baker told him. "We'll go round up the ones who can still fight."

"I'm truly sorry about this," said Natasha.

She jerked hard on the ends of the nylon rope she had used to tie up Morgan, the pilot of Tony Stark's corporate jet. But then, she wanted to

make certain his bonds were secure.

Morgan swore at her, his eyes popping out, his face ruddy with anger. But his words were unintelligible thanks to the gag she had stuffed in his mouth.

Next, Natasha turned her attention to the maintenance crew, which consisted of three other men. Like Morgan, they were tied up and gagged. It hadn't been easy to incapacitate them without causing injury, but she had managed.

Finally, there were the two security guards whose job it was to watch the hangar. They didn't look thrilled to have been disarmed and trussed up like Christmas turkeys. It was all right. They would get over it.

Getting to her feet, Natasha surveyed her handiwork. She couldn't imagine any of her captives getting free. The only way that would happen would be if someone found them.

Which would take place in just about four hours, with the change of shifts. But by then, if all went according to plan, she would be in spitting distance of her destination.

Not that she intended to do any spitting. Just flying.

Fortunately, Natasha had piloted any number of aircraft - jets included - in her spying days. The only difference was that this one had silk sheets on the beds, a fifty thousand dollar sound system, and a refrigerator full of good Russian caviar.

She wished she could enjoy it. But the journey on which she was embarking was anything but a pleasure cruise.

The Enclave was an immense, high-walled gray fortress that angled halfway across the mouth of the Hudson River from the west side of Manhattan, resting on a peninsula that hadn't existed back in the twenty-first century. All in all, it must have boasted a good five square miles' worth of space.

Stark had taken up a position on the roof of a ruined building almost in the leviathan's shadow. Otherwise, Digger's device wouldn't have worked. And though the hulk of an ancient, half-crumbled water tower had offered him some concealment, he had to abandon it if he was going to get a

move on.

Line of sight, Digger had said. And Stark wasn't about to diverge from that admonition.

Farther uptown, Baker and his people were retreating from the rats' forces, having attacked the base of the Enclave wall with their energy weapons - a futile gesture, as it would have taken them hours of concentrated fire to punch a hole in it. All they had accomplished was to draw out a swarm of Scaredy Men.

Which, of course, was exactly what Stark had needed them to do. According to Digger, none of the guards would be held back in such a maneuver. The place would temporarily be bereft of its entire garrison.

That still left the Enclave's towering walls to keep its occupants separate and apart from the outside world. And ordinarily, they would have been enough. But with a little luck, Stark would soon find himself inside them.

The first step was for him to remove his armor, even though the thought of doing so made him uneasy, to say the least.

It wasn't just the fact that it boasted such powerful weapons, or that it protected him from the weapons of others. It was also his only link with the twenty-first century, the only tangible evidence that he had really traveled across time, and that he wasn't just some lunatic who thought he had.

But there was no way around it. If Stark was going to penetrate the Enclave and have a chance of getting home, he was going to have to risk everything on a single roll of Digger's dice.

First, he took off his helmet and laid it on the ground beside him. Then he slipped off his gloves and his boots, and placed them beside his helmet. Next came his arm pieces, his legs pieces, and finally his apple-red plastron.

All of which left Stark standing there in his underwear, his skin covered with viscous green lubricant. Unfortunately, the armor wasn't meant to be worn for such a prolonged time, and the stuff had begun to congeal here and there.

A wind curled around him, making him shiver. With his armor on, he hadn't fully appreciated how chilly the mornings were.

So here I am, he thought, freezing on a mountain of debris hundreds of years in the future . . . in my undergarments. Of all the situations in which I never expected to find myself...

Kneeling, Stark took the fist-sized device Digger had bestowed upon him and placed it in the pile of Iron Man components, which maxed out the device's mass limit all by themselves. Then he tapped in the command Digger had given him. Its accuracy was confirmed when the unit's blue-on-black digital readout displayed precisely the set of numbers it was supposed to display.

But Digger hadn't used the device in years. What if it malfunctioned and sent the armor to the wrong place? Or failed to return after it had done its job?

Then I'm just slightly out of luck, Stark thought.

Taking a deep breath, he touched the stud on the device that activated it. Then he got up and stepped back, and counted the seconds to himself. Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven...

Stark felt an urge to deactivate the device, or to at least throw it away from his armor. But he

resisted it. He had to get back to his proper time, after all, and this was the only shot he had of accomplishing that.

Three, he thought. Two. One...

Suddenly there was a flash of yellow-white light, bright enough to blind him for a moment. When he opened his eyes, the device and his armor were gone.

Digger didn't say anything about a flash, he thought, his heart sinking in his chest.

Had something gone wrong? Stark would know soon enough. In a matter of seconds, in fact.

Rubbing his arms to subdue the rising gooseflesh, he watched the spot where the armor had been. And waited. And grew uncomfortably aware of the time passing by.

Come on, he commanded the device, make it hack to me. Show me I wasn't nuts to trust the guy I got you from.

But nothing happened. Laden with disappointment, Stark sat down on the weed-

covered mound. All right. I'm a complete and utter idiot. I just sent my armor who-knows-where.

What could he do now? Try to scale the walls of the Enclave? Give the guards a good laugh?

Hey, foe, there's a guy out there in his underwear. Wanna bet I can take him down in one shot?

Stark chuckled miserably. Yes, that's right. You might as well laugh. He had just consigned the twenty-first century to whatever the Tomorrow Men had in mind for it.

Nice work, he told himself.

It was at precisely that moment that he saw another flash. And as his eyes recovered from it, he realized Digger's device was sitting in front of him.

Damned right, he thought, feeling a delicious surge of pure joy. I knew Digger would come through for me. Never doubted the old scalawag for a moment.

But he would have to trust Digger a great deal now, even more than he had before. Because the next thing to be teleported wasn't a pile of armor. It was Stark himself

He had seen the Enclave's guards vanish into thin air, and assumed they had come out all right on the other end. But he hadn't received any proof of it.

And the guards had been using what must have been well-maintained, state-of-the-art equipment. Not the cobwebbed antique Digger had bestowed upon him.

Stark wished he knew what his armor looked like when it was done teleporting. He wished he could assure himself that it was the way he had designed it, and not rearranged in some way.

Because if he entrusted himself to Digger's device, he didn't want to be rearranged. He wanted to come out exactly as he was, down to the last glib, devil-may-care molecule.

But there's no guarantee of that, is there?

Not any more than he was guaranteed to wake up

the next day, the growth in his brain content to leave him alone a while longer. Or to survive the test flight of his next set of armor.

Life, lived properly, was a series of risks. If I needed certainty, Stark thought, I would have become an accountant.

Scooping up the device, the industrialist reset it according to Digger's instructions. Then he touched the stud again, activating its teleportation function.

As before, he endured a period of approximately ten seconds while the device powered up. But he didn't count down. He just waited and wondered what being teleported would feel like.

What it would look like. Sound like.

It wasn't long before he got his answer.

"You look distracted," said Weyland, in the most sympathetic voice he could manage.

Sitting behind the desk in his office, Fury scowled. "Tony Stark wasn't just my partner here, He was my friend."

The Tomorrow Man leaned forward in his chair and nodded. "I understand, General. It wasn't easy for us to accept Haggerty's loss either."

In fact, it wasn't. Nor had it been easy for him to ask her to make the ultimate sacrifice. However, Haggerty hadn't hesitated to do her duty. She knew how important it was to gain the trust of everyone in the Triskelion.

But then, Haggerty had been one of the mission's biggest supporters from the beginning. She came from a large family. She knew what it would mean to them if the mission succeeded - what it would mean to everyone in the Enclave.

"Unfortunately," said Weyland, "Mister Stark was also a big part of your task force. I hope you're not going to have to delay your action because of his absence."

Fury shook his head. "We can't afford to. Our communications guys can only pull the wool over Tiber's eyes for so long. Even without Stark, we should have enough firepower..."

"But?" said the Tomorrow Man, hearing the word in the way the general's voice trailed off.

"But I'd have preferred to see him with us."

Weyland, on the other hand, couldn't have been happier about Stark's blunder. It played right into the Tomorrow Men's hands, depriving the Ultimates of one of their big guns.

So when they walked into the Tiber facility in the Andes, and were surprised that the fanatics were ready for them this time, they would have one less titan on their side. If all went well, the trap would prove the Ultimates' undoing.

Even Thor's. But then, history had shown he could be destroyed. It would just take some ingenuity, which the Tiberites possessed in abundance.

Then Weyland and his brethren would use their teleportation capability to join their comrades in the Caucasus, and the entire Earth would feel their presence.

"Anyway," the general said, "I just wanted to bring you up to speed. And to thank you for your help in finding these fanatics."

"It's I who am grateful," Weyland told him. "You

and your colleagues have made it possible for my people to find themselves in a whole new world."

Inwardly, the Tomorrow Man chuckled at his little joke - because that was precisely what the Ultimates had done. And soon they would have reason to regret it.

To Stark's surprise, there was nothing to feel or see or hear when it came to being teleported by Digger's device. It was simply a matter of being in one place one moment and somewhere else the next.

Fortunately for Tony Stark, that somewhere else was right beside the armor he had removed a few minutes earlier. Happy to see it again, he didn't waste any time putting it back on.

He was glad he wouldn't have to endure any interruptions. But then, he had materialized in the guards' barracks - an austere-looking place with overhead lighting, two levels of beds, and a computer workstation at either end - and all its occupants were otherwise engaged at the moment, thanks to Baker.

Still, it wasn't easy donning the armor. Back in

the Triskelion, Stark had always had a team of technicians to help him get the parts on and off. There, in the heart of the enemy's stronghold, he had no one to look to but himself.

The plastron was the hardest part. It was made up of two sections, one in front and one in back, and they had to snap together just so. It was a job for a contortionist, and with the rest of his armor in place he was hardly in a position to be flexible.

Bend, forgodsakes.

Finally, the plastron fell into line. Slipping his mask on, Stark completed his ensemble. There, he thought, that's better.

A graphic appeared before his eyes, notifying him that he was low on tactical power. That's okay, he thought. If all goes well, I won't need much.

Moving to one of the computer workstations, he hacked into the Enclave's network, which wasn't a great deal more advanced than the one he used back at the Triskelion. Then he kept the promise he made to Baker and Digger.

His next step was a little trickier. If there was a working time-travel device in the Enclave, it had to be attached to a considerable power source - one that would give off an easily distinguishable energy signature.

Of course, there was no guarantee the power source was in operation at the moment, so Stark would need a little luck to find it. Activating the energy sensors in his armor, he searched for the requisite level of output.

Paydirt, he thought, discovering an enormous energy signature not more than a hundred yards away.

If Digger's layout of the Enclave was on the money, the power source was in another building.

However, it would be accessible from the barracks through an underground tunnel.

Stark hoped Digger knew what he was talking about. After all, this wasn't just an industrial compound - it was also a place where people lived. There were bound to be some of them walking around, visiting their neighbors, taking their kids to the playground.

He had no problem going at it with the guards - the Scaredy Men, as Baker's people called them. But no matter what the Enclave had done to those outside its walls, Stark didn't want to place its innocents in a destructive crossfire.

Come on, he thought, aware that Baker's diversion wouldn't last forever.

Proceeding on foot, he moved out of the barracks and into the hallway beyond them. And immediately ran into trouble.

A couple of guards were in the corridor, headed in Stark's direction. Their eyes widening, they stopped and raised their energy rifles to fire at him.

Stark had time to think: Digger was wrong. Not all the Scaredy Men are fighting off the rabble.

Activating his thrusters, he twisted to the left to avoid the guards' energy bursts. Then he fired back, hammering his adversaries with electromagnetic force.

It sent them reeling head over heels, their rifles scarring the walls of the corridor with their fire.

By the time the guards stopped tumbling, they were unconscious.

Stark had no intention of examining them as he flew past, heading for the underground tunnel. Then something caught his eye, forcing him to land at the guards' side.

He was transfixed by it, as incapable of motion as if his brain had been severed from the rest of his body. Because the thing he was staring at wasn't supposed to be there.

Stark ran his metal-encased finger over it, knowing it as well as he knew his own likeness in the bathroom mirror. And why shouldn't he?

He had designed it. He had sat through long meetings with a corporate image company from the Netherlands and, in the end, thrown away all their ideas in favor of his own.

The two supercontinents, Laurasia and Gondwana, that had existed one hundred and fifty million years ago, rendered in dark green on a disc of light blue ocean. With a yellow star at four o'clock and another at ten o'clock. All surrounded by a band of black, like the eternal

night of space, and then a larger band of royal blue with the company's name on it...

Stark International.

His company. And its logo was on the sleeve of an Enclave mercenary two hundred years after his death. It didn't make sense. And yet, it did.

The grimmest kind of sense.

The Enclave was made up of the wealthy and privileged. People like Stark and his executives. People who could have maintained their advantage over the rest of society if they played their cards right, no matter how bleak the future became.

My God, he thought, a chill climbing his spine.

He had left his mark on the future all right. But it wasn't the kind of mark he had intended.

And the Scaredy Men... they were security guards. Baker and his people had mangled the word with their twenty-third-century accent, but all they were describing were the successors to Stark's private safety and security force.

It made him that much more eager to get back to his rightful time. To do whatever he could to prevent what he had seen there from becoming a reality.

Tearing himself away from the Stark insignia, he propelled himself along the corridor until he came to a juncture and turned left. A few meters later, he went right again. If Digger's memory hadn't failed him, this was the tunnel that led to the next building.

At the pace Stark was maintaining, he was able to negotiate the concrete enclosure in a matter of seconds. But at the other end, he found his way blocked by a metal door.

Rather than use his pulse-emitters, he put his head down and rammed right through it. Beyond the doorway was a large, multistoried chamber with an immense, spider-shaped generator in the center of it.

Stark could feel its power drumming in the floor as he landed on it. The engineer in him wanted to stop and understand how the machine worked, but the rest of him knew he had no time.

The time-travel device couldn't be far away. After all, why generate all that power unless there was a demand for it? And what was more energy-consuming an application than a portal through time?

All I've got to do, thought Stark, is find it.

He was trying to decide where and how to look when he heard the ominous sound of company coming. Unfortunately, he didn't think it was the Welcome Wagon.

Obviously, Stark had been spotted. Maybe by a hidden camera, maybe by a sensor he had tripped when he nailed the guards in the corridor. In any case, his job had just gotten a lot tougher.

The one thing he could depend on was that the security men wouldn't be firing at maximum intensity. Not when he was so close to the power generator.

As Stark thought that, two small squads of security guards burst in on him - one through the doorway he had smashed open and another through an entrance on the opposite side of the chamber.

Directing a series of pulses at the first group, he saw a couple of them get knocked backward. But the others kept coming. And before he could address the problem, he felt an impact from behind.

By rights, Stark should barely have felt it. Instead, it was like a hammer smashing him in the ribs, knocking the wind out of him and making him see stars.

And he knew why. His armor's structural integrity field had fizzled out all of a sudden, letting him down as it had so many times in the testing stage.

Bad timing, he mused.

Rolling to avoid a second hit, Stark took aim at the guards behind him - and sent a pair of them crashing into a wall. But a moment later, an energy beam drove him to the floor. His head swam furiously, placing him on the verge of blacking out.

It doesn't matter, he promised himself. They're not going to stop me.

Somehow, Stark dragged himself back from the brink of unconsciousness and fired in the direction the blast had come from. The cry he heard told him he had lucked out and hit his target.

A beam from somewhere else missed him, glancing off the floor beside him. Raising his head, he caught sight of his last remaining adversary and took him out with a well-aimed pulse.

The chamber fell silent, except for the rhythmic drumming of the generator. Stark would have liked to lose himself in it, to regroup after the beating he took. However, he still had a mission to accomplish.

Getting his legs beneath him, he thrust himself off the floor.

Just in time to see two more guards rush in through the ruined doorway. Dazed as he was, Stark couldn't fire as quickly as they did.

He didn't know which one hit him, but the impact was like a kick in the face, throwing him into a wall. Spitting blood into his mask, he pushed the

wall away.

Not when I'm so close, he thought.

As if from a great distance, Stark heard a sound like a series of exploding firecrackers. Footfalls, he realized. The sound of more guards pouring into the room, adding to the odds against him.

Gritting his teeth, he raised his arms and tried to fire off a pulse barrage. But his emitters wouldn't respond, their power supply finally depleted. Stark heard laughter.

Then he felt the one last blow - the one that sent him plummeting into the depths of oblivion.

19

JEDEDIAH STRINGFELLOW SCRUTINIZED THE gray and crimson suit of armor crumpled at his feet.

It was difficult to believe there was someone

inside it. And even more difficult to believe that that person could be the one who invented the armor in the first place.

But then, Stringfellow and his colleagues had opened a can of worms when they sent their agents back to the twenty-first century to pave the way for their exodus. And this, it seemed, was one of the worms that had squirmed out of the can.

"Remarkable," he found himself saying.

Of course, it was possible that the armor had come through the temporal barrier on its own, and that one of the rabble had donned it out of curiosity. Or that it had been preserved outside the Enclave, though that begged the question of where it could have gotten its batteries charged.

However, Stringfellow and his comrades had accounted for all the armor in existence. If a suit wasn't hanging in their museum, it had been destroyed a long time ago.

Nor would it have been possible for someone to operate the armor so skillfully unless he enjoyed a certain intimacy with it. And only one man had

ever enjoyed that sort of intimacy.

A man who died hundreds of years ago. Or at least that was the way things had gone the first time. At this point, there was no telling what his fate would be.

"What should we do with him?" asked the ranking security guard in the room.

"First," said Stringfellow, "get him out of the armor. Then confine him to an empty apartment."

"Actually," said the guard, "we've already tried to get him out of the armor - without any luck."

Stringfellow eyed the man. "It's locked?"

"I guess you could say that."

"You're sure?"

The guard nodded. "Damned sure. He's in there to stay."

Stringfellow sighed. He knew as well as anyone in the Enclave that the armor had an automatic locking trigger, assuming its wearer chose to

activate it. And apparently, he had.

Of course, the armor wasn't indestructible. They could blast away at it until they punched a hole in it. But that would prove fatal to the individual inside.

Then they wouldn't know under what circumstances he had managed to transport himself through time. And that information might prove essential to the success of their enterprise before it was over.

So destroying the armor wasn't an option. Stringfellow would have to find another way to get what he wanted.

Cursing the razor-edged chill in the air, Natasha wished she could have ditched Stark International's corporate jet a little closer to the Tiber facility.

However, the snow-choked mountains through which she was trudging in her fiber-filled whitesuit weren't as chock-full of viable landing sites as she would have liked. As it was, she had nearly cracked j up in a long, narrow valley. It was only the abundance of soft, powdery snow

that had saved her - as well as Stark's winged investment.

Certainly, he would forgive her if she found him alive. And if she didn't, the shape of his flying playpen would unquestionably be the least of his problems.

Besides, she had plenty of her own worries. The possibility, for instance, that whoever had taken over Tiber's fortress had taken note of her landing. Or that Stark's pilot had been discovered sooner than she had anticipated, and was already complaining to Fury about her stealing the plane.

Which would prompt the general to send out an advisory alerting the Tiber facility, along with a hundred other SHIELD operations around the world, to Natasha's little indiscretion. Hell, she thought, he might have done it already.

Except SHIELD wasn't in control of the Tiber facility any longer. It couldn't be, or its people would have answered truthfully when Fury contacted them about Tony Stark.

Which meant Natasha would find a nice warm welcome waiting for her. Not that she hadn't

been welcomed that way before, on one occasion or another, and lived to tell of it. But seldom had so much rested on her shoulders.

It wasn't just Stark whom Natasha was hoping to save. It was also all the SHIELD operatives the general had left in the mountain, who might or might not have survived the Tomorrow Men's attentions, i

And she didn't dare ask Fury or any of her Ultimates colleagues for assistance. Not when it might give her away, and in the process cost those operatives their lives.

Only after Natasha had rescued whomever she could rescue would she contact the general and tell him everything she knew. Because at that point, the Tomorrow Men wouldn't have a bunch of hostages to use as leverage.

Natasha trudged on, watching her breath freeze on the air ahead of her. She knew it was a long shot she was betting on.

But as Virgil had so aptly noted two thousand years earlier, fortune favored the bold. No self-respecting spy had ever waited for her stars to be

in complete alignment before she undertook a mission.

One had to roll the dice sometimes, leap now and look afterward.

So that's what I'm doing, Natasha mused. Taking a chance. Rolling the dice.

She just hoped they didn't come up snake eyes.

The door to the room where Stark was standing under guard slid open again. Turning his head, he saw someone enter.

But it wasn't another silent, wary security man coming to confirm that his battery was depleted. It was someone in civilian clothes. Someone with authority, Stark decided. At least, that was the way the fellow carried himself

He was platinum blond and clean-shaven, except for an equally platinum tuft of hair in the cleft of his chin, with high cheekbones and thick lips. Though he was on the thin side, he looked soft, as if he hadn't exercised in a good, long while.

If ever.

"My name," the man said, "is Stringfellow. Like most everyone here, I'm a big fan of your work, Mister Stark. But then, I owe everything I have, indeed everything I am, to Stark International and its legacy."

Don't rub it in, Stark thought.

"I regret," said Stringfellow, "that you haven't had a chance to see our community here. It's really quite Utopian by twenty-first-century standards. A haven for the arts, for pure research, for spiritual introspection..."

"Where," said Stark, "you devise ways to keep the rest of humanity in perpetual fear and misery"

Stringfellow smiled. "If you've met those of whom you speak, you know how little they have in common with real human beings. Unfortunately, we are increasingly besieged by them, and security personnel willing to lay down their lives are difficult to come by. The likelihood, I'm afraid, is that our sanctuary will be overrun someday and that we'll pay a price for maintaining it.

"Unless, of course, we can find a way to escape

our plight. But where in the world could we go where we wouldn't be subject to hatred and violence? Nowhere. Which is why we felt compelled to seek a refuge beyond this world."

Stark made a sound of disgust. Why hadn't he seen it earlier? "You're going to escape to the past."

"Precisely," said Stringfellow "Hence, our efforts to open a massive rift in time - one that is big and sturdy enough to accommodate several hundred of us transiting from our time to yours."

"My guess is you've already seen a manifestation of that rift - in the Tiber facility you were kind enough to secure for us. That facility was important in that we needed more power to effect the transit, and Tiber boasted that level of power."

"Why not just send a few people at a time?" Stark asked. "The way you did with the first group?"

"Because," said Stringfellow, "even that modest effort was more dangerous than we expected, nearly blowing up our power generator and the rest of the Enclave along with it. We didn't dare

try it again unless we had a source on the other end sharing the burden."

And even then, thought Stark, there's an element of unpredictability in the process. Otherwise, he wouldn't have woken so far from the portal.

"You think the Ultimates will stand by," he asked, "and let you carry out your plan unopposed?"

"Weyland will make certain your intervention is an isolated event. And once we make the transit, we don't expect any trouble. Quite clearly, we have the knowledge of future events and the technological expertise to dominate your era, and we intend to use those tools to their fullest advantage."

"Haven't you forgotten the Grandfather Paradox? Altering the past will alter your future - maybe even to the point where your parents never meet each other."

"It's not a concern," said Stringfellow. "You see, our world is in a different branch of the timeline - a branch that diverged from yours just prior to the year two thousand. So we can do what we like in your branch and still keep our past intact."

That explains that, Stark thought.

"In the meantime," said Stringfellow, "I would like nothing better than to sit down and talk with you about the innovations you implemented back in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and perhaps come to a better understanding of your thinking. However, until we effect the transit, you present something of a threat to us - much more so than the gutter slugs who assault our supply caravans from time to time, forcing us to retaliate.

"I have two options. One is to hold you until you waste away and turn to rot. However, I would like to avoid the unpleasantness of scraping you out of there. Perhaps a better alternative would be to make things uncomfortable for you - so very uncomfortable that anyone in his right mind would beg me to relieve his pain."

"Anyone but me," said Stark.

"We both know," said Stringfellow, "that you'll eventually give in and come out of your armor. It can't end any other way. If I were you, I'd accept that conclusion sooner rather than later."

"Not a chance."

"Come now," said Stringfellow. "We have studied your behavior down to the last minute detail - not only what you have done to this point in your life, but what you will do in the future. In some ways, we know you better than you know yourself"

"You don't know me," Stark told him. "All you know is the Tony Stark who existed in your branch of the timeline. And that's a whole different deal, my friend."

Stringfellow considered him for a moment. Then he said, "At the very least, it will be an interesting experiment in human endurance. I hope you come to see it that way as well... eventually."

"Go to hell," said Stark.

His captor chuckled. "I knew you'd say that."

Then he left the room, leaving Stark to ponder what he had learned.

It was fortunate, Stark thought, that the automotive maintenance building in which he found himself wasn't occupied by one of the supply trucks the Enclave entertained from time to time.

Because if that were the case, Stringfellow would have been compelled to find another place to bind his captive's wrists and ankles with chains of dark gray composite and spread-eagle him upright a meter above the floor.

'Well,' said the blond man, 'here we are. And we've yet to see a sign that you're willing to cooperate.'

"Imagine that," said Stark.

Stringfellow chuckled. "You'll be interested to know that your counterpart in our timeline was every bit as stubborn as you are. But then, he was never asked to endure what you're going to endure."

"My security people have set their rifles on their widest aperture, which will drastically reduce the impact of their beams but in equal portion increase their temperature. Naturally, that heat will be transferred to your armor.

"Though it has a built-in cooling system, I assure you - having seen the specs for even more advanced models - it will prove insufficient. Unless you indicate you've had a change of heart and wish to remove the armor, you'll bake to death."

"Sounds nasty" said Stark

"Only you will know how nasty," said his captor.

He signaled the half-dozen guards positioned in front of and behind Stark, and the barrage began. The six beams bathed Stark in their violet light, making his armor seem to glow.

Inside his helmet, an advisory graphic appeared. It warned him that the ambient temperature was climbing rapidly, and also showed him its projected effect over time.

In two minutes, the temperature inside the suit

would climb to ninety degrees Fahrenheit. In an additional forty-five seconds, it would reach one hundred degrees.

And so on.

But Stark didn't need the graphic to tell him what his future held.

He could already feel the heat building up in his armor, sending beads of sweat trickling down the sides of his face.

It didn't help that his structural integrity field was on the blink, but even that would only have saved him for so long. Eventually, the guards' energy beams would still have gotten to him.

As they're getting to me now, he thought.

He felt like a lobster broiling in its shell. The armor's oxygen supply was already like the air on the hottest, stillest, most oppressive day of summer, when one couldn't inhale hard enough or long enough. It made him wish he could take his mask off, if only for a moment, to draw a breath of cool, fresh air.

But Stark wasn't going to give in to the bastards. Not when so much depended on him. Not when he was the only hope of two eras in two different timelines.

His graphic told him the temperature in his armor was approaching a hundred degrees, and showing no sign of stopping. It's not the heat, he found himself musing idiotically, it's the humidity.

And it was plenty humid in his metal-alloy shell, a result of the perspiration squeezing out of his every pore, bathing him in its salty brew. But it couldn't cool him off because there wasn't any air around him to facilitate evaporation.

One hundred and four, according to the graphic.

Stark licked his lips. He was abominably thirsty. And he felt himself getting lightheaded, as if he'd had a few too many, which would have been several too many for anyone else. His knees were getting weak, rubbery, even though there wasn't any weight forcing its burden on them.

All he had to do was say a word to free himself from his sweatbox - the word that would audio-trigger a mechanism in his mask and pop it

forward. Nothing more complicated than that.

But he wouldn't do it.

"It must be getting sticky in there," said Stringfellow, wincing as if in sympathy. "If it were me, I'd have thrown in the towel a long time ago."

One hundred and eight.

"There's a point of no return," said Stringfellow. "You know that, right? Once your core temperature reaches a hundred and five degrees, there won't be anything we can do for you. But you can't wait that long, because well before that you'll be too confused to know what's happening to you."

He was right. Stark was losing focus, getting nauseous, feeling his heart start to pound in his chest. He was well on his way to suffering heat stroke.

One hundred and twelve.

"Do yourself a favor," said Stringfellow, "and open your armor before it's too late. You've fought the good fight. There's no shame in yielding now."

One hundred and fifteen.

"Please," said his captor, looking disgusted. "This doesn't have to go any farther."

Stark didn't answer him, but he knew he was in trouble. He had stopped sweating, which wasn't at all a good sign, and it wouldn't be long before he lost consciousness.

One hundred and eighteen.

The heat was unbearable, Stark's armor an oven wringing the last drops of liquid out of him. But he hung in there, knowing his ordeal would be over in a few more seconds.

"You're insane," whispered Stringfellow.

Am I? Stark asked silently.

Bending his middle finger to touch the palm of his metal gauntlet, he reactivated his tactical systems. All through his armor, energy surged in dramatically increased amounts.

Flexing his newfound muscle, Stark pulled against the composite chain holding his right hand

outstretched and tore himself free of it. Then, with a jerk of his left hand, he ripped apart the chain on the other side.

'What's going on?' Stringfellow demanded shrilly of his guards.

"I dunno!" barked the highest-ranking security man.

But Stark knew.

The conversion unit in his armor that accepted downloads of extra power from Stark International satellites could also accept power from other sources - like the armor's surface, which boasted a crude energy-collection net.

So while the security guards were doing their best to cook Stark alive, his armor was diverting part of what they were dishing out and directing it to his primary battery.

Obviously, the collection net was a feature Stark's counterpart in this timeline hadn't included in his Iron Man designs. Otherwise, Stringfellow would have realized he was playing into his captive's hands.

"Switch to impact!" the blond man cried, his voice cracking with urgency.

Even as they maintained their barrage, the guards narrowed their apertures. Their beams became needle-thin, devastatingly powerful streams of force.

But Stark was ready for them. Engaging his heel-thrusters, he snapped the chains holding his ankles. Then, snaking his way around the walls at high speed, he began taking potshots at the guards.

Three of them went skidding across the floor before any of them even dealt him a glancing blow. And two more were put out of commission before they came close again.

That left Stringfellow and a single guard remaining. But really just the guard, because the blond man was already fleeing the maintenance facility.

Let him go, Stark told himself

Executing an evasive maneuver, he avoided the last guard's beam. Then he released a series of

pulses and sent the man cannonballing into a pile of chains.

Which left no one to stop Stark from doing what he had penetrated the Enclave to do - finding the time portal that would, if he were lucky, get him home.

Unfortunately, he still didn't know where to find it. However, as one of the guards was still conscious, he hoped to rectify that deficit in short order.

Grabbing the man by the front of his uniform shirt, Stark lowered his masked face until he was almost nose-to-nose with his adversary. Then he said, "Where's the time portal?"

The man might have denied any knowledge of it, or told Stark to go to hell. But he didn't. In fact, he seemed to take some perverse pleasure in answering the question.

"If you're lying," said Stark, doing his best impression of Nick Fury, "I'll be back."

"You kidding?" the man muttered. "I don't like this place any better than you do. If I didn't have

to eat..." His voice trailed off miserably.

Satisfied, Stark released the man and headed for what he hoped was the building housing the time portal.

Baker was still marveling at his luck at sunset, when he came in sight of his people's encampment.

Torricelli, who hated to admit that she was wrong, wouldn't say a word to him as she went to find her blanket and get some rest. But her silence was as big a concession as anything she might have uttered.

Despite her misgivings, their entire party of forty-five had returned unscathed from its skirmish with the Scaredy Men - their third in as many days. They were bruised and bone-tired, but not really any the worse for wear.

And to be truthful, it had done Baker's heart good to see all those Scaredy Men swarm frantically out of the Enclave like angry bees from a violated hive. Even now, he couldn't help smiling about it.

Infact, he thought, we'll have to do it again

sometime, just to see how mad it makes them.

As word got around that the fighters had come home, people gathered around them to hear the stories that had come of their effort - tales of suspense and relief, fear and courage. Tales to astonish and to inspire outrage.

Patricia seemed more eager than anyone to hear what had happened. But then, it was no secret that she had taken a liking to the armored man.

"Did he make it?" she asked Baker.

Though Patricia was the one who had posed the question, the others clearly wanted to know as well. But he couldn't give them an answer.

"We gave him the distraction he wanted," said Baker. "Beyond that, I have no way of knowing."

And it was possible he would never know.

One thing was for certain, though. Without the stranger, they were way the hell back where they had started.

For years, his people had been going after the

Enclave's caravans. At times, it seemed that they were making progress, that they were on the verge of breaking the bastards' supply lines. But in the end, the Enclave had always gotten what it wanted.

And why not? It had all the resources, all the firepower, all the technology. All Baker had were fragile bodies and cranky old weapons, and whatever power sources he could scrape together.

The man in the armor had changed that. He had given them the upper hand for once. He had given them a chance. But now that he was gone, their chance was gone as well.

Baker sighed.

I'm the elder, he thought, the leader. Everyone trusts me to make the right decisions. But he couldn't do the impossible.

He had had such high hopes when he launched his first angry raid on the rats' supplies. He had dreamed of a time when there was no Enclave, and everything it had was the property of his people.

Dreams are for fools, he told himself.

"Hey, Baker," someone said.

He glanced over his shoulder. It was Torricelli. She looked like she had something on her mind, but when didn't she look that way?

Pulling him aside, she said, "Take a look at this," and handed him a palm-sized personal access device.

Baker scanned its green-on-black display. It showed him a series of seven- and eight-digit codes.

"What are they?" he asked. ,

"I had no idea either," Torricelli said, "until I checked out the source of the transmission. The coordinates put it right in the middle of the Enclave."

Baker punched in a command and confirmed it. Then he looked at his comrade. "Someone's transmitting codes from the Enclave?"

"You think it could be him?" she asked.

He shook his head. It seemed crazy. "It's hard to imagine he had the time to set up a transmission."

"But if he did," Torricelli said, "what would he have sent us?"

Baker smiled to himself Was it possible? "Defens codes." The kind that would disable the locks on the Enclave's entrances.

She looked at him disbelievingly. "You're not serious."

"There's a way to find out," Baker told her. "But we can only try this once. After that, they'll change the codes."

Torricelli smiled. "If this works ..."

We'll be free, he thought. But he didn't want to jinx their chances by saying it out loud.

What he said instead was, "Find Perez and Chung for me. Looks like we've got something to talk about."

The security guard hadn't lied.

Stark found the time portal in an otherwise empty building far from the heart of the Enclave, in the shadow of one of its dark gray walls. Nor were there any guards there to stop him from blasting his way through the door, though he was certain he would have the pleasure of their company in the next minute or so.

The portal looked like a smaller version of what he had seen in the Caucasus - a black whirlpool eagerly corkscrewing itself into the fabric of reality. It was insufficient, at this point, to send the population of the Enclave back to the twenty-first century of Stark's timeline.

But it had enough juice to transport the Tomorrow Men, he thought, so it should have enough to transport me as well.

Stark wished he knew if the mechanism's targeted time and place had been reset for some reason. Or if some essential component had been temporarily removed from it. Or if transport required data he wasn't prepared to input.

As it was, he might emerge in the fifth century, watching Attila the Hun slaughter a phalanx of

Roman centurions. Or in the eleventh, witnessing Leif Ericsson's historic arrival at the shore of Labrador. In either case, he would be stuck there, since there weren't any time portals to bring him back.

But those weren't the worst fates he could envision. He might wind up dead, ravaged by the stresses of temporal translocation, or a reconfigured amalgam of organic and inorganic materials, borrowing matter from both his body and the armor. The prospect made him want to retch just thinking about it.

Not that Stark was going to let any of those possibilities stand in his way.

He thought about all the people he cared about, from Happy Hogan to Jarvis to Fury, to Rogers and Thor and Jan. Then he thought about Natasha in particular.

It was worth the risk. No doubt about it.

If the twenty-first century was flooded with a population of future-spawned tyrants, it wasn't going to be because Tony Stark took the coward's way out. Here goes nothing, he thought, and

propelled himself into the dark spinning energies of the whirlpool.

21

Natasha clung to the slope over the main entrance to the Tiber facility, perched on a couple of pylons she had driven into the icy surface, and waited for a response from the people within.

Whoever they were.

She doubted she would have to wait long. The current occupants couldn't have had too many callers since they moved in. It was a cinch they would be coming out to see who rang the doorbell.

Or more accurately, set off a tiny plastic explosive on the relatively flat surface outside their door.

Just as Natasha had expected, a section of

mountainside receded, permitting access to the inside of the place. A moment later, three figures came out with rifles in their arms.

Two men and a woman, dressed in white and green. Just like the Tomorrow Men.

Natasha didn't know where the bastards had come from, or why they were there. But it was clear to her that they were responsible for Tony Stark's disappearance, not to mention that of the SHIELD contingent Fury had left there.

Thor would have needed more information before he started swinging his hammer. Even Fury would have wanted a little more context. But Natasha had been a spy. She was inclined to start firing before she knew all the particulars.

The trio of Tomorrow Men scanned the slope below and around then, but never thought to look up. Exchanging glances, they shrugged and retreated through the open doorway.

Natasha smiled tautly. Works every time.

She waited until the faux section of slope had begun sliding back into place. Then she pulled

her automatic pistols from their holsters, dropped to the frozen surface in front of the entrance, and put a silent bullet in each of the three sentinels.

That left her free to enter the atrium, her feet moving so fast they barely touched the floor.

When Natasha entered a hostile environment, she normally had a sense of where she was going. This wasn't one of those times. Her plan was simply to stay alive until she found Stark and whoever else was being held captive.

Assuming, of course, that their captors hadn't killed them yet.

Unfortunately, Natasha hadn't made it halfway across the atrium before she attracted energy fire from other watchmen. Violet bursts came at her from two different directions. As it happened, both of them missed.

Tucking and rolling, she crossed her weapons and returned fire. One Tomorrow Man fell over the rail and plummeted six stories to his death. The other one just kept firing.

Self-adjusting force fields linked in a wireless

network, Natasha thought as she headed for the enclosed stairwell. Got to love it.

She had reached the second floor before another adversary added her energy beam to the first one. Then a third beam joined the party, and a fourth.

Natasha fired back, but it was no use - not with the Tomorrow Men's force fields stopping her bullets. And as quickly as she was moving, their crossfire was closing in on her, making it impossible for her to linger on the second floor.

But if she abandoned it, she was placing herself in even greater danger. Because in the office windows across the atrium she could see the reflection of yet another enemy, standing a floor above her, waiting to skewer her if she went over the rail.

She went over it anyway.

After all, she was the Black Widow, the zenith of Soviet technology. There could have been a hundred of the buggers and they still wouldn't have caught her.

But as Natasha swung up to the floor above her, intending to confront her hidden adversary at close quarters, she found he was gone. It was then that her feeling of invincibility faded, leaving a sinking feeling in its place.

She had known the Tomorrow Men could teleport. Indeed, she had anticipated their doing so since the moment she set foot in the place.

But she had no idea they could do it that quickly.

Suddenly, their energy beams were coming at Natasha from a whole new set of angles. She tried to make the adjustment, contort her body so that they all missed.

She almost succeeded. However, one beam proved too difficult to elude.

It spun her around and sent her crashing into the wall behind her. Lurching away from it, she tried to clear her head, get her bearings. But before she could accomplish that, another beam hit her in the ribs.

It knocked all the wind out of her. Gasping for breath, she tried to find her enemies through

tear-filled eyes. What she could identify, she fired at, for all the good it did her.

Before long, her clips were empty. And there were Tomorrow Men standing all around her, their rifles trained on her. At this range, they would kill her with a single burst.

"Well," said one of them in a familiar voice, "I can't tell you how sorry I am to see you here." It was Weyland.

The other Tomorrow Men - Chadaputra, Matsubayashi, and Kosar - were standing on either side of him, armed like their comrades. Obviously, they had teleported themselves there from the Triskelion.

"No doubt" Natasha rasped, "I would be sorry too if someone stumbled on my plot to double-cross the Ultimates."

"Fortunately," Weyland continued, "your teammates are already on a SHIELD heli-carrier, well on their way to the Andes - where, since we have warned Tiber they're coming, they will walk into a trap. And Happy Hogan will be unable to advise them of our disappearance, as we've

incapacitated all his communications equipment.

"Of course, we would have preferred to keep a low profile until after the Ultimates were destroyed. However, the difficulty you presented here made it necessary for us to leave the Triskelion pre-maturely."

"I'm a pest," said Natasha. "It's my nature."

"So I see," said Weyland.

'What about Tony Stark?'

"I wasn't the one who encountered him," said Weyland, "but he's no longer an issue for us."

"So you killed him?" The words were bitter in her mouth, but she had to know.

"No," said Weyland. "Nothing quite so final. But you're not likely to see him again."

"There's no one left to stop you," Natasha observed.

"That's our assessment as well," Weyland told her.

Before the words were out of his mouth, Natasha had slipped between two of the Tomorrow Men and was sprinting for the open door. Her side still hurt and her breath was ragged, but she knew she had to make the attempt.

What's more, she almost made it.

But before Natasha could reach the exit, an energy beam slammed her square in the middle of the back. The next thing she knew, she was lying face-up on the floor, a frigid wind stinging her face - and she was numb from the waist down.

"That was inadvisable," said Weyland, making his way toward her with his rifle in hand.

Get up, Natasha told herself

Using her arms alone, she pushed herself off the floor.

"You're determined," the Tomorrow Man observed. "History didn't lie in that regard."

Get up, Natasha thought, and shut his mouth for him.

But it didn't look like she would get the chance, because Weyland was already aiming his weapon at her.

The first thing Stark saw as he burst into the atrium of Tiber's stronghold was a knot of nine or ten Tomorrow Men, energy rifles in their hands. The second was a feminine figure lying on the floor in one of SHIELD'S whitesuits.

Natasha, he thought, his heart climbing into his throat.

And hers wasn't the only face he recognized. Weyland was looking back at Stark, surprise and anger fighting for control of his features. Clearly, he hadn't expected the armored Ultimate to return after he had been flung into the future.

If you've killed her, Stark had time to promise, you'll wish Baker's people had gotten hold of you instead.

Then the Tomorrow Men were firing their bolts of violet energy at him. And Stark, whose batteries were still seething with power because of the barrage they had absorbed, returned their fire.

Two Tomorrow Men went hurtling backward, despite their personal shields. But his next two targets didn't go down so easily, merely staggering under the impact.

They're adjusting, Stark thought, just as they did back in the Triskelion.

Applying a sudden burst of thrust, he avoided the beams of the Tomorrow Men who were still standing. But it. wasn't easy, since they were coming at him from so many different directions.

Back in the Triskelion, Stark had been able to incapacitate the Tomorrow Men at close range, shields or no shields. He had to try to do that again.

Zeroing in on the closest of his adversaries, he unleashed a series of electromagnetic pulses at the highest intensity he could muster. At first, they only jostled the Tomorrow Man, spoiling his aim. But as Stark got closer, he was able to pound the invader into the wall behind him.

Zagging sharply, he saw the beams that had followed him gouge the wall instead. Then he went after another Tomorrow Man, positioned on

the same wall but higher up.

But as Stark soared to reach him, a blast caught him in the shoulder. Without his structural integrity field, it hurt him worse than it should have. Then another energy stream sent him spinning off course. And as he tried to make a correction, a third shot drove him into a rail.

Can't stop, Stark thought, narrowly avoiding a violet beam as he flew off the rail.

But he was still weak from the searing heat he had endured in the Enclave, not to mention all the hits he had absorbed along the way. And as much as he wanted to end the threat of the Tomorrow Men, he was outnumbered and outgunned.

Eventually, the bastards would neutralize him. It was just a matter of time.

Then something bizarre happened. The Tomorrow Man closest to him - the one he had intended to go after - began slapping his neck instead of firing his weapon.

Stark felt like laughing. But instead, he hit the

invader with a pulse volley, sending him sprawling.

Looking back over his shoulder, he saw a red, white, and blue shield collapse a Tomorrow Man across the atrium. Then another fell victim to a dark blur. A third one sprouted an arrow. And a fourth appeared to slip, banging his head on the rail to stunning effect.

One of the two remaining Tomorrow Men fired at the owner of the shield. Big mistake, Stark thought.

At the same time, he saw Weyland reach for the teleportation control on the inside of his sleeve. Rocketing at him with all the speed in his plasma thrusters, Stark emitted a stream of pulses.

They jarred Weyland, but not enough to keep him from firing back. Raising his rifle, he took aim at his enemy - whereupon Stark executed the maneuver he wished he had executed back in the Triskelion.

Pulling up short, he bent backward into a loop - thereby eluding the energy beam with which Weyland meant to spear him. Then he completed

the loop and came around for another pass.

Too slow to react, the Tomorrow Man went down under the force of Stark's tackle, losing his grip on his rifle, It clattered across the floor and stopped ten feet away from him.

Of course, there was a chance he had other weapons in his suit. So, still embroiled with Weyland, Stark hauled off and struck him - hard enough to knock him out. But the Tomorrow Man remained in control of his senses.

"You can't beat me," Weyland said, spitting blood at his adversary. "I've got the future on my side."

"I've got news for you," Stark told him, recalling the codes he had sent to Baker. "'tbur future is about to become history."

Then he hit Weyland again, snapping his head around, and this time the Tomorrow Man went limp.

He was still breathing, still alive. But he wasn't going to do any conquering in the near future.

Finally, Stark was able to take a look at Natasha.

She was lying on the floor, still as death.

Please be all right he thought.

Thor hovered in the frosty air of the unheated hangar, his breath snaking from his nostrils and freezing on his moustache, and got his first glimpse of what Stark had called a temporal portal.

It yawned in front of him, a black flower, a fountain of liquid ebony. And if he watched closely enough he could see it grow, albeit in tiny increments, its hold increasing on Midgard's reality with each passing moment.

Somewhere beneath it were the engines that had helped to create it, working to open a passage from Thor's time to that of the Tomorrow Men. But the machines were hidden below the floor. All Thor could see was the rising, spreading darkness.

He was reminded of Mimir's Well at the outskirts of frozen Jotunheim. It too was black as pitch, and offered those brave enough to pay the giant's price a glimpse of the shadowy yet-to-be.

Indeed, if he waited long enough, he would see the future - in the form of the tyrannical elite on whose behalf the Tomorrow Men had labored. They would come pouring into this world from their own, a flood of human poison, carrying with them the wizardry to dominate this era as they had dominated their own.

But Thor was a god. He too wielded power, the kind mortals found it difficult to wrap their brains around. In fact, prior to his epiphany in the insane asylum, he himself had been unable to accept the things he could do.

Or who he was.

He had that trouble no longer. He marshaled the lightning of heaven with ease and familiarity, and even a measure of affection.

It was his tool, just like Mjolnir. His birthright, established with his first mewling scream at the gray, shrugging skies. It was what he did.

And he did it now, absorbing electricity from the air around him as if he were one of Stark's batteries, and then unleashing it through his hammer in a paroxysm of blue fury.

It plunged into the dark blossom below him as he had seen the world-serpent plunge into the sea, invading the portal's deepest depths, forcing its light down the thing's immense maw. And there it strove with the energies that powered the time-gate, striking at them with the force of its splendor, stabbing at them with the unbridled savagery of the storm.

Like a living thing, the portal struck back, sending shoots of black energy up at the source of its torment. But they didn't reach far enough to touch the son of Odin, or to stop him.

So he stuck another blue-white dagger into its heart. And another. And grudgingly, the maelstrom began to succumb. It shriveled, collapsed in on itself and finally blinked out of existence.

Leaving nothing in its wake, as if it had never been there at all. Thor was pleased.

This world belonged to the mortals of the twenty-first century. He wasn't going to let any so-called Tomorrow Men take it away from them.

Kneeling beside Natasha, Stark brushed her hair

away from her face. Then he flipped back his mask and listened to her chest.

Her heart was beating. He could feel it, strong and determined.

Thank God. As if to reassure him, her lids fluttered open. Her eyes looked tired, unfocused, but as beautiful as ever as they took in the sight of him.

"What do you think you're doing?" she muttered.

"Saving your rear end," said Stark. "Weyland looked as if he was about to demolish it, and the rest of you along with it."

"Actually," said Natasha, her voice slow and sluggish, "I was luring him into a false sense of security." She tried to move and winced in pain. "Though I may have done too good a job of it."

"Something broken?"

"It would be easier to tell you what's still intact. At least I'm starting to feel my legs again." She looked past him at their teammates. "What the hell are they doing here?"

"When I got here, I contacted Fury, who was on a heli-carrier over the Andes. I told him not to go ahead with the mission, which was a trap - and also to send reinforcements."

Natasha stared at him for a moment. Then she said, "Thor teleported them here. Of course." Her brow pinched. "But where the hell were you?"

"In the future," said Stark, "remarkable as it sounds. I'll tell you all about it sometime."

"What about Sitwell and the others?"

"At least some of them are still alive - locked up two levels down, if my aural sensors aren't deceiving me. I would have freed them, except I didn't want to tip the Tomorrow Men to my presence here."

Natasha looked up at him for a moment. Then, without warning, she pulled his face down to hers and kissed him.

"What happened to "Let's be comrades?" he asked.

"Who said that?"

"I believe it was you."

"It must have been one of your other women."

"Right now," Stark said, "I can't think of any other women," and kissed her again.

"What the hell... ?" someone said.

It was Barton. And the reason for his exclamation was clear.

Each of the Tomorrow Men was disappearing into his or her own small, swirling blackness. And there was nothing the Ultimates could do about it but watch.

Until, a moment later, the invaders were all gone.

Thor emerged into the atrium, joining his comrades. "Obviously," he said, "the Tomorrow Men didn't need a portal to retrieve so few"

"Obviously," Barton echoed, looking a little creeped out by the manner of his adversaries' disappearance.

"You think they'll try again?" Pietro asked.

"Of course," said Rogers. "What have they got to lose? All they have to do is approach us earlier in our timeline. And if they fail, they can do it again. And again."

"Until they get it right," Thor suggested.

Jan shook her head. "I don't think so. I think there was something optimum about the moment in which they came to us."

"She's right," said Stark, helping Natasha sit up. "Otherwise, why choose our branch of the timeline over all the others available to them?"

"Then maybe," said Jan, "their next move will be against another branch. The one that gives them their next best shot."

"In that case," said Rogers, "I hope whoever's watching over it is ready for them."

Epilogue

"You're kidding," said Banner.

On the other side of the transparent barrier, Betty Ross shook her head. "You didn't hear it from me, but Fury wasn't happy with the way things went down in the Caucasus. He says we need more firepower, especially if Thor decides to leave us flat someday, which - considering Goldilocks's politics - could happen without a moment's notice."

The scientist was almost afraid to embrace the news. "So he needs more super-people. And he wants me to work on them."

"Also Hank Pym," said Betty. "In fact, he wants you to work on them together. That's not a problem, is it?"

Banner wanted desperately to feel useful again.

He would have worked alongside Hannibal Lechter.

"Not at all," he said.

"Good. Because Fury thinks he can get the money in the next couple of months. And he wants to see Pym gainfully employed, considering how helpful he was vis-a-vis the Tomorrow Men."

Banner understood. If not for Pym, Natasha would never have gone to the Caucasus and given Stark the help he needed to wreck the Tomorrow Men's plan.

He was more surprised about his own inclusion in the project. After all, he had been one of the first to trust the Tomorrow Men. But eventually, everyone had trusted them. And Banner had been smart enough to keep his mouth shut when he saw Pym pull up communications logs instead of blood analysis.

In any case, he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Not when he got so few of them.

Betty tilted her head as if to appraise Banner from a different angle. "You know," she said, "I haven't seen that smile in quite a while. You know, the one where the corner of your mouth goes up."

He shrugged. "It's been a while since I had a

reason to smile."

She regarded the scientist a moment longer. Then she said, "I think you need a reason to smile more often... if you know what I mean."

Whereupon Betty did something she hadn't done in years. She winked at him - just before she glanced at her watch, mumbled something, and took off.

As Banner watched her leave, he thought, Sometimes life doesn't suck so badly after all.

Tony Stark opened his eyes.

He was in the bedroom of his penthouse, looking out at the towers of Manhattan. In the east, a spectacular dawn was breaking. It painted the windows of the skyscrapers with golden light, making them look as if they were on fire.

It's a beautiful city, the billionaire thought. He wanted it to stay that way, always.

Natasha squirmed beside him, laid her head in the hollow of his shoulder. "You awake?" she asked.

"No," he told her. "Still sleeping, apparently. And having the most remarkable dream."

"What about?"

"A night of fiery, unrelenting passion. The stuff of which legends are made."

She smiled. "Now I know why they call you Iron Man." She ran her fingers through the hair on his chest. "No doubt, you've heard that line before."

"Never from anyone as beautiful as you," he told her

"Such a silver tongue. Should I believe it?"

"Without question."

She purred. "I like the sound of that."

Without warning, Natasha sat up and pulled one of the covers around her. Then she got out of bed, gave Stark a wink, and said, "I'll be right back."

Her bare feet made tiny slapping noises as she made her way across the floor. They ended in the

vicinity of a place he knew all too well - his liquor alcove.

"Martini," she said, "right?"

He shook his head. "No thanks."

She looked at him as if he had grown another head. "Are you feeling all right?"

They had beaten the Tomorrow Men, foiled their scheme to hand over the present to the privileged elite of the future. They had turned away an invader nearly as powerful as the alien Chitauri.

It was over.

And then again, it wasn't.

"It's my fault," he told her.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The state of the future," he explained. "The poverty, the violence, the oppression. All on my head."

Natasha chuckled appreciatively. "You've got some ego, you know that? Maybe somebody else deserves some of the credit."

"I saw the Stark logo on the sleeves of those security men. It wasn't a coincidence."

"Wait a second," she said, returning to bed. "The Tomorrow Men came from a different timeline. They said as much. So that's not our future."

"If it could happen in their timeline," said Stark, "it could happen in ours as well."

"So what are you supposed to do about it? Or not do about it?"

"I don't know," he said, smiling bitterly. "And therein lies the problem."

She shook her head. "No, Tony. There's no problem. Because in this timeline, you've received a warning. You know what to expect. And with that knowledge under your belt, you can avoid whatever mistakes you might have made in that other timeline"

"But how will I know they're mistakes?" he asked.

"What if I always do what I think is right, but inadvertently make the choice that gets us into trouble?"

"What if I die tomorrow?"

In their line of work, it was always a possibility. "I'd miss you," Stark told her in all sincerity.

"My point," Natasha said, "is there are no guarantees in this world. All you can do is forge ahead and hope for the best."

"I can't do that," he said. "It's not in my nature."

"I know," she said, "I've seen the documentary. Tony Stark is a human dynamo. Tony Stark won't take no for an answer. Tony Stark gets things done when no one else can. And why is that, I ask you? Why are you the first, secondh and third richest men in the history of the universe?"

"Actually," he said, "I'm the - "

"Because," she said, refusing to be distracted, "you don't second-guess yourself. You do the right thing and you don't look back. And you know, the more I think about it, the more I

wonder if in forging that bleak future you saw, Stark International might have avoided an even bleaker future."

He felt as if his feet had been knocked out from under him. I hadn't considered that.

"What if Weyland's world isn't the worst-case scenario? What if it would have been even more nightmarish except for the relentless vigilance of Tony Stark?"

He shook his head. "That doesn't mean I can sit back and let things happen."

"Then don't. Oversee every little detail - you're going to do that anyway. Just don't fret about it." She traced a line from his temple to his jaw with the tip of her finger. "You'll get worry lines."

He had to admit that she made sense. "What did I do to deserve you?" he asked.

"Maybe you haven't done it yet," she suggested. "Time is a funny thing, you know."

He looked into her eyes. "Really."

"I have it on good authority."

Stark kissed her. He had no choice. But even then, the future invaded his thoughts.

He saw Baker and Torricelli hunkered down in the overgrown, rubble-strewn streets, ducking blast after blast, fighting a war they couldn't hope to win. But he could.

Stark had always been concerned with his legacy, how he would be judged by generations to come. But he had reason now to be even more concerned. He needed to go at his job even harder, take it even more seriously because it wasn't just a matter of how people remembered him anymore. It was bigger than that.

As big as any aspiration Man had ever had. Because as Stark had seen, all those aspirations could come to nothing.

So he would wake each day thinking of the future, and do everything in his power to steer it in the right direction. Every day, he vowed, without fail.

But he would start tomorrow.

Today, he reflected, drinking in the heady nearness of Natasha, I've got other things on my mind.

Acknowledgments

I remember being eight years old, holding the first issue of The Avengers in my hands (my reward for not kvetching too much about the tooth I'd just had pulled), and thinking Hmm, what's this? Like many. Marvel comics of its day, its cover was irresistible - a confrontation between Loki, god of evil, and a cadre of solo protagonists who had come together as "Earth's Mightiest Super Heroes."

If you could just feel the resolve, the animosity, the power about to be unleashed. But then, that cover was penciled by Jack "King" Kirby, whose work was so visceral it leaped off the page, grabbed you by the throat, and left marks for days afterward.

But the real attraction, in my preadolescent

mind, was the prospect of seeing Thor (my favorite Marvel character), Iron Man, the Hulk, Ant Man, and the Wasp all in the same comic - not only then, but for months to come. And who was better equipped to direct this production than Stan Lee, the most exciting writer/editor in comics, whose fertile imagination had birthed all these characters in the first place.

I could barely wrap my head around the possibilities.

Flash forward about forty years. I'm a lot more than eight years old, and by now - inspired by titles like The Avengers - I've written almost two hundred comics myself, so it takes a lot to impress me. But I'm holding the first issue of The Ultimates in my hands and thinking, Hmm, what's this?

Writer Mark Millar and pencil artist Bryan Hitch (with Andrew Currie on inks, madman Chris Eliopoulos on letters, and Paul Mounts on colors) had breathed new life into the Avengers concept, making it more sophisticated, more ambivalent, more realistic. Again, I could barely wrap my head around the possibilities.

Then my editor at PocketBooks, Margaret Clark, called me with an offer. She wanted me to write a novel based on The Ultimates, filling in the gap between volumes one and two. Obviously, I thought, there is a God, and he's a comic fan.

So let me thank Margaret, along with Marvel Creative Services for giving me this absolute plum of an assignment; Lee, Kirby, and The Ultimates creative team for building such a great sandbox; artist Don Heck for designing the original Wasp, Hawkeye, and Black Widow characters; and Joe Simon for (along with Jack Kirby) creating the iconic Captain America back in the forties. Not to mention Bob Green-berger, who gave me my first comic scripting assignment ever.

I couldn't have done it without you guys. And now, with your indulgence, I'm going to say something I've always wanted to say: "Excelsior, True Believer!"

Whew. I hope that was as good for you as it was for me.

- MJF

Revision Notes:

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